A BOMBER PILOT'S STORY

THE GEORGE H. NEILSON WORLD WAR II MEMOIRS

Robert P. Neilson

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"Sure enough, we were off as the first signs of light crept through the cold, grey clouds, sloshing down the runway which was so wet and muddy that spray went 50 feet in the air as each plane roared down the mat and pried itself into the sacred day that it would be our duty to obliterate at least for some people!"

----Lt. George H. Neilson
December 25, 1944
Foggia, Italy

ROBERT P. NEILSON

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Dedicated To
Anastasia Mahoney Neilson
Elisabeth Anastasia Neilson
Dorothy Louise Byrnes Neilson
and
Those Who Did Not Return

With deep reverence, this book is dedicated to Anastasia Mahoney Neilson, mother of George H. Neilson, known in these pages as *Ma,* Elizabeth Anastasia Neilson, or *Betty,* the only daughter of Anastasia and William Henry Neilson, the sister of George, William, and Robert Neilson. These two women were not on the front lines, nor were they in the bombers five miles above the earth. They were not shot at, nor did they live in cold, damp tents or abide in constant fear of bodily harm, death, or cruel imprisonment. They did, however, suffer incredibly as their beloved sons and brothers braved the hazardous front lines, the submarine infested sea crossings, and air routes of all-out war. They supported their loved ones with constant letters, care packages, loyalty, and prayer. They were heroes in the true sense of the word as were their loved ones who fought. The third dedicatee, Dorothy Louise Byrnes Neilson or "Dottie," was a woman who did not write to George during the war, but became acquainted with him shortly after his return from military duty. She became George Neilson's co-pilot for 54 years in that great mission called marriage and family, which began on September 11, 1948. She was, in this wonderful, frightening adventure, not only his copilot, but his navigator, operations officer, radio operator, nose gunner, flight engineer, etc. In countless times of George's absence on business trips, Dorothy sat in the first pilot's seat.

In addition to these three remarkable women, this work is dedicated to hundreds of thousands of brave men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice so that freedom and civil government, even civility itself might yet live and thrive on this planet. This group, Those Who Did Not Return, gave up all their wonderful tomorrows, their years of falling in love, of having a family, of a

work career, of having their dreams come true, and even of their wisdom-bearing disappointments. These are those who were blown apart by exploding mortars, pierced and torn with the sting of speeding bullets, snuffed out in disintegrating planes, buried in nameless graves in mired battlefields, men whose remains will ever lie in steel tombs on ocean floors. These are they whose tortured and exhausted bodies succumbed to the depravities of war prisons, who collapsed and were shot on forced marches, who were mown down on beaches and cliffs, whose flying coffins were smashed in accidents. Many of those who did not return perished of the dread diseases that always accompany that vile business we call war. Those who did not return are those whose loved-ones endured the feared official visits of soldiers in dress uniforms, the devastating telegrams, and even worse, who lived out their lives never knowing their soldier's fate. Without these courageous souls, George and millions of others who survived may not have.

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Prologue

War Is an Insane Procedure

Ever since the dawn of time, there has been war on the earth. Its face has changed over the centuries, and never so much as in the past one. For millennia, most wars have taken the form of throngs of men on foot or horseback, armed with blades and clubs, slugging and slashing each other to death. Then, like now, war was unmitigated brutality, an ugly aberration of human activity in which the behavior of earth's most ferocious beasts seemed gentle in comparison. Modern military technology and the Industrial Revolution have given a new face to war yet have not improved upon its incomprehensible horror. In fact, ballistic weapons, vehicular mechanization, air flight, electronic technology, and even atomic science have vastly increased the capacity of nations and armies to conduct total war, destroying human lives and property in astronomical proportions.

In the fall of 1972, I found myself in basic training for the United States Army, having been drafted during the Vietnam War. During that challenging time in my life, I found divine recompense in being at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, less than two hours away from my uncle Robert C. Neilson's retirement farm in New Ulm between San Antonio and Houston. On more than one of those blessed weekend passes I spent with George Neilson's brother Bob, we discussed the subject of war, as it was something paramount in my thoughts at the time. Standing beside his tractor, I remember the decorated World War II veteran's words in the drawl of his adopted Texas, "War is an insane procedure."

In the four decades since then, I have thought often of the profound accuracy of those simple words. I have long wondered how it is that soldiers, confronted with a high possibility of injury or death, can, in defiance of the innate instinct of self-preservation,

walk, float, or fly into the jaws of armed combat. Indeed, I have concluded there must be a certain insanity about it. Yet it is in this very act that a person rises above his humanity and ascends nigh unto divinity, offering his life for his friends and principles.

It was to no little degree that my father's service as a bomber pilot in the US Army Air Corps (later known as the US Air Force) lent strength to me as I coped mentally with the idea of being in the army. I was one of the last draftees of the Vietnam War Era, and having entered the service at least six months before the Paris Peace Accord was signed on January 27, 1973, I became officially a Vietnam Era veteran. It is a designation not of deserving but merely of history, since I was never in combat. Yet during my advanced individual training (which followed basic training for eight weeks), I was continuously exposed to the horror of war. The instructional films for the 91A-10 (combat medic) training were made during actual battle scenes from the prolonged conflict in the jungles and rice fields of Southeast Asia. There were grotesque images of bodies pulled from combat for the medics to work on. Knowing that I could feasibly be going into this kind of situation caused me to have great introspection into the concept of war.

It was as fortunate as it was destiny that I was assigned to the US Army Europe, Germany specifically, where not a single shot had been fired between hostile powers since the infamous Third Reich of Adolf Hitler collapsed in ashes twenty-seven years earlier. It was fortunate, because ours was a peacetime mission only. But it was also personal, because I was part of the European peace plan that my father, George Hutchinson Neilson, helped fight to achieve nearly three decades earlier. I wrote this book first to honor the wartime service of my father, now twenty-four years deceased, and also out of a lifelong fascination with military history, specifically war. This allure arises of war's ghastly inhumanity that so ironically brings out so much humanity in those who are involved in it.

There are many ways to view war as history. One is to study military campaigns, weaponry, and strategy. This, the *military history* approach, is important but somewhat impersonal. Another

is to weave *social history* into the fabric with military events and operations. This approach explains how the conflict affected life beyond the battlefields in the belligerent nations. It recognizes that war is more than the clashing of military units on the fields, skies, or seas of battle. Another way to explore the subject of war is to view it through the eyes of individuals who participated in it. *A Bomber Pilot's Story* is this approach, a *microhistory*. It is the story of a man, but it is more. It is the story of a family, of crews and units, of a time and its geopolitical events, and of a generation of Americans. None of these stories are complete but brushstrokes of a greater picture of something at once repulsive and absorbing. If there were one central theme I have attempted to craft, it is that the story of a war cannot be separated from the stories of the men and women involved in it, at home and abroad. Additionally, it is that war, on an individual soldier's level, is far more than battles, for all the other aspects of life continue while one is *at war*. And how they play out in real lives is an incredibly fascinating drama.

Chapter 1

A World Broken: World War II Overview

World War I and Versailles

The history of the Second World War has been chronicled in countless pages of books, documents, journals, and letters, as well as films and pictures. The greatest conflagration known to man changed so profoundly the course of modern history that it will never be totally forgotten. Yet some treatment of the historical context in which George Neilson served his country will be of benefit to those generations hence who live in a time when these tumultuous events are relegated to the dusty attic of the past.

Some historians have suggested that World Wars I and II were effectively one war with a twenty-year truce between them. This is so not only because of the brevity of the interwar period but because it is almost universally accepted that World War II occurred because the issues exposed by the first war were not resolved by it. Furthermore, the seeds of a future conflict were sown in the Treaty of Versailles, the formal document ending World War I. The peace treaty concluding the so-called *war to end all wars* imposed such punitive measures on the vanquished German empire of Kaiser Wilhelm I that it gave birth to a virulent discontent that was to erupt within five years after the guns fell silent.

Versailles had the objective of rendering Germany a pariah state, an affront to the German pride that was a legacy as old as the Teutonic tribes that had been subsumed into the Holy Roman Empire dating back to the tenth century. The reparations costs alone imposed on Germany by the Allied powers ravaged its economy, sending the Deutschmark into a state of hyperbolic inflation. In the ruins of the fledgling Weimar state established

following a brief revolution at the end of the war, the disgruntled Prussian masses sought a voice of hope for a resurgent German nationalism. In the dangerous political and economic vacuum created by Versailles' crushing oppression, that voice came forth from an obscure World War I army corporal, the son of a part-Jewish Austrian laborer. His name was Adolf Hitler.

Hitler and the Nazi Party

Hitler, a psychopathic genius, rose from humble beginnings to the threshold of conquering the world and destroying Western civilization. This brutal dictator's name is synonymous with despotism. Though in sheer numbers of victims he is not without peers in the wide scope of history, he was the architect of one of the most fearful regimes the world has known. Founded by a group of disenchanted thugs hell-bent on revenging the wrongs wrought upon the fatherland by Versailles, the National Socialist German Workers Party was first established in Bavaria. The name of the party was abbreviated in German as the NSDAP and commonly known as the Nazi Party from the German pronunciation of the word *national*: nah-tsi-oh-nahl. Hatched in the noisy beer cellars of Munich, the rise of this nefarious band incubated in the poverty, chaos, and humiliation of postwar Germany.

The field was fertile for the growth of the malignancy that manifested itself in the perverted nationalism and ethnic hatreds of this fascist gang. Its adherents were mostly uneducated, unprincipled, and unscrupulous. They pushed their way to notoriety by the knife, the fist, and the revolver on the streets of Munich in the 1920s. For over a decade, the embryonic worm of National Socialism incubated among the disenfranchised masses of Germany. The political ascendancy of the NSDAP was astoundingly fast. It happened that through a complex process of political scheming, the National Socialists gained enough votes to win the Reichstag (parliament) in the 1933 elections. Thus their leader, Adolf Hitler, became chancellor of Germany through a paradoxically legitimate constitutional process. In so doing,

that constitution became a worthless scrap. It was the end of Germany's brief foray into democracy.

Hitler's gift of charisma enabled his rhetoric to catch the imagination of the German people. Within a short few months after the Nazis' ascent to power, the swastika was flying from almost every building in the German Reich from the Black Forest to East Prussia. The infamous swastika was a pagan symbol derived from a broken cross, having its roots in the Holy Roman Empire that once ruled the Germanic peoples in north-central Europe. Indeed the Nazi regime drew its spiritual power from the medieval domains of darkness. Their platform was based on Hitler's notion of the superiority of the hypothetical Aryan race, which was allegedly epitomized in the Germanic peoples. According to this racist theory, this "master race" was destined to rule the world and subjugate all other people to it. The party drew its perverse strength as well from its appealing message of revived German nationalism as from its overarching hatreds: Judaism, Bolshevism, and less overtly proclaimed, Slavic civilization.[1] So, as America slipped into a new isolationism born of the tragedies of The Great War and the Great Depression, the next global conflict was fomenting among the people of the former Central Powers.

In addition to the rise of the empires of Germany and Japan in the decades after World War I, the Bolshevik Revolution held an ever-tighter grip on the vast Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, which stretched from Poland to the Pacific Ocean. Under the ruthless and tyrannical rule of Josef Stalin (a name taken on by the peasant's son, meaning *man of steel),* some twenty million Soviet citizens were shot or worked to death in the gulag labor camps in order to discipline the Eurasian super state as a true and monolithic embodiment of Marxism-Leninism. The result was a nation under the dark cloud of a godless slavery, mortally loyal to its leader who molded and shaped the Soviet Union with an iron fist to fit his designs to Sovietize the rest of the world by persuasion if possible, and by armed compulsion if not. From the perhaps well-intentioned nineteenth-century wealth-equalization theories of Marx and Engels arose the cancer of Communism,

which for much of the twentieth century engulfed large portions of the Eastern Hemisphere and had footholds in the West.

The Axis of Despotism

The inevitable clash of socialistic totalitarianism and constitutional democracy rendered 1930s Europe a powder keg. With two powerful dictators converging in Eastern Europe, and another expanding in the Far East, it was only a matter of time before the territorial ambitions of these vast amoebas of power collided in a monstrous cauldron of war. The political situation, along with an explosive growth in military technology fueled largely by World War I, cast the fate of nations in a gargantuan conflict of unprecedented magnitude.

Germany, Italy, and Japan of the 1930s shared at least one thing in common. The national leadership took on a demagogic character, and demanded the same devotion and servitude of the masses as had Caesar, Genghis Khan, and Alexander the Great. In both Germany and Japan, nationalism virtually became god. This Fascism was the disease, and Nazism and Imperialism were its strains. Leader adulation, racism, the cult of infallibility, and fear of the long arm of a police state extinguished any and all open dissent. Nations became mere tools in the hands of ruthless demagogues who used them to attempt to satiate their inexhaustible appetites for power. The leading Axis tyrants would not hesitate to sacrifice millions of their own people for purposes ranging from military strategy to ethnic genocide, to ultimately punitive national suicide.

Persecution of Jews was an age-old scourge, particularly in Eastern Europe. In that sense, Hitler was not unique. But none had carried it to the extent of the Nazi's *Final Solution*, the term for the plan to kill and dispose of millions of European Jews using a system of industrialized murder.

Immediately after coming to power, the Nazis began a massive program of rearmament in violation of the Versailles Treaty. During the late thirties, the German Reich (also called the Third

Reich, the first two being the Holy Roman Empire and the Kaiser Reich from 1871 to 1918) began a diplomatic offensive to gain hegemony in Europe. With one hand, Hitler offered his neighbors an olive branch, while the other lured states into his lethal grasp. Also in violation of Versailles, the German Wehrmacht (army) occupied the demilitarized Rhineland in 1936. Two years later, the Sudetenland, a part of Czechoslovakia with a large German-speaking population, was devoured into the Reich. Within a few months, Germany occupied the whole of Czechoslovakia. The same year, Hitler's legions marched unopposed into Vienna, seizing Austria through what is known in history as the Anschluss (annexation). Hitler's aims of territorial expansionism should have been clear to world leaders, who were instead duped into believing the Nazi dictator's deceptions of peace.

The Western Democracies Bow

With memories of the bloodbaths at the Somme, Verdun, and Ypres in the first war, few in the West had any stomach for a new war, so instead the Western democracies capitulated to Hitler's *peaceful* aggressions. The most notable of such was at the Munich Conference when Britain's Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain accepted the annexation of the Sudetenland in exchange for what he billed to the British as "peace in our time." The naivety of Munich and similar stand-downs had dire consequences for the Western democracies. Only after the *blitzkrieg* (lightning war) swept through Poland in September 1939, crushing the weak nation with devastating speed, did they wake up to the intentions of the German fuehrer. By then, it was too late. World War II, a conflict that was to result in the deaths of more than sixty million people and unfathomable suffering, had begun. It would be six long years before the Third Reich was vanquished.

Entering World War I, the United States made a major break from the isolationism that had long governed the nation's foreign policy. It was only with great reluctance, shattered by the sinking of the *Lusitania*, that the Wilson administration sent troops to fight

in France. Following the armistice on November 11, 1918, America retreated back into its historical reclusiveness. The outbreak of another war in Europe tested the US neutrality resolve. For twenty-eight months after Hitler invaded Poland in September 1939, the isolationist policy held.

During 1940, the Wehrmacht swept the Western European countries of France, Belgium, Norway, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg with its notorious blitzkrieg, advancing rapidly with overwhelming forces of air and land power. The first phase of blitzkrieg was to soften up the front with aerial bombing, followed by an artillery barrage, and finally land troops supported heavily by tank units. Indeed Hitler terrorized his neighbors with his Panzer divisions. The result was horrifically successful. The Western powers fell like dominoes in a few months. By December 1940, the war was lapping at England's shores. But Hitler had not counted on the resolve of the British to defend their island homeland. The Luftwaffe left London in ashes but curtailed the bombing siege after fifty-seven continuous days, with the Royal Air Force still in control of the skies over the British Isles.

On June 22, 1941, the German Wehrmacht poured millions of troops across the Soviet frontier, engrossing the army in its most ambitious yet reckless front. The fateful invasion of Russia and its satellite states would, in a matter of months, become bogged down in a war of attrition that would ultimately bring the Nazi behemoth to its knees, leaving twenty million Soviet dead in its murderous wake. As with Great Britain, Hitler had not reckoned with the tenacity of Russia's massive proletarian army. Nonetheless, it took four bloody years of fighting before the malignancy of Nazism was expelled from Europe.

On the Other Side of the World

At the same time that Europe began its descent into the dark night of barbarism, the ancient tradition of the *samurai* (noble warrior) was resurrected in the Empire of Japan. For some time, Japan dominated the Western Pacific and parts of East Asia in

trade and military power. Its influence proliferated through what was known as the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Company, a pseudo name for Japanese hegemony in the region. Since the early twenties, the military elite in Tokyo was consolidating its power across the most populous region of the world. Although the chief Japanese warlord, Prime Minister Hideki Tojo, was not as well-known historically as Hitler, he presided over a similar development in the so-called *oriental* world, a region little known and understood in the West. Indeed, Japan had been a reclusive nation until July 1853 when Commodore Robert Perry sailed into Tokyo Bay as an emissary from the United States to open the doors of Japan to Western trade and influence. The eventual result was industrialization on a scale that by the 1930s permitted the building of a modern army, navy, and air force that rivaled any in the West.

As the war in Europe raged, Japanese forces were fanned out on land and sea over vast reaches of the Pacific Ocean. War in the Asia-Pacific region had been going on long before Hitler invaded Poland. In 1931, the Japanese occupied Manchuria and in 1937 attacked Eastern China. Poignant are the atrocities of the Japanese army in ruthlessly subduing the Chinese, including the Rape of Nanking, the murderous rampage of Chiang-Kai-Shek's Nationalist Chinese capitol, where 300,000 civilians were killed. The march of conquest engulfed wide tracts of the Western Pacific, the Dutch East Indies, and parts of Southeast Asia.

On December 7, 1941, an armada of carrier-based Japanese aircraft bombed and strafed the US Pacific Fleet in dock at Oahu. The attack on Pearl Harbor was the death knell of American isolationism. The next day, Congress declared war on Japan. Three days later, Germany declared war on the United States, and the United States entered the global conflict on two fronts.[2]

Among the myriad people swept into the global tempest were the three sons of a Boston merchant and his widow. The youngest of these was a twenty-year-old college student named George Neilson. In the dark days of 1942, when the Allies were getting beaten on the land, in the air, and at sea, George enlisted in the

United States Army Air Corps. That is when this story begins. It is largely through the eyes of this young man that we will take a deeply personal look into the greatest war in earth's history. In the vast backdrop of the tragedy that left sixty million people dead, untold millions injured and homeless, and nations across the globe groping to find a new world order, George Neilson's story is but a splinter in a barn. And yet epochal world events are made up of the individual stories of those who were touched by them, in this case the fighting soldiers, the civilian populations that were ravaged, and the loved ones who sent servicemen off to war, many never to see them again. Though George did not lose his life in the conflict, he, like millions of his compatriots, placed himself in a situation where he readily could have. Though their reasons for stepping forth were not purely altruistic, their doing so made it possible for those who followed to live in a world not dominated by tyranny and oppression. This story is a tribute not only to my father, George Hutchinson Neilson, but to all who placed duty and hope over fear and despair that liberty might live. Neither George nor most of the millions who were part of "democracy's swift sword" in defeating the Axis considered themselves heroes. Yet we who are the heirs of the great peace they bought at so dear a price know otherwise.[1]

Chapter 2

A Boy from Boston: George H. Neilson, Early Years

Medford, Massachusetts

On February 25, 1943, George Neilson left the Boston South Station on a train bound for Atlantic City, New Jersey, where the US Army Air Corps reception station was located. It was a scene repeated all over the world in countless places. Young men, boys really, saying good-bye to mothers, fathers, wives, sweethearts, and friends as they headed off into an uncertain future in the armed forces of their nations. For George, like many of his compatriots, this was going to be his first trip away from home at any significant distance.

In his letters home, George referred to himself and his fellow cadets as "boys." Though he was twenty-one years old, the term boys was fitting. He had completed a college degree but lived at home and was quite green as to the ways of men and the world. Yet before the journey that began that day was over, this "boy" would fly a massive four-engine bomber aircraft into withering enemy fire in heavily fortified Nazi-occupied Europe. Not once but twenty-eight times. He would do and see things that he never could have imagined on that nervous train ride to New Jersey, seventy-two years ago at this writing. He would become part of what became known as "The Greatest Generation" in news anchor Tom Brokaw's book by the same name, his chronicle of the US role in World War II.[1] George would survive and return home. Many of his cohorts would not. The psychological trauma experienced on those deadly combat missions, however, would affect George for the rest of his life. The experience described here defined and shaped my father, like so many others, for his later life after the war.

Family Background

William Henry Neilson, George's father, was the fifth child of a nineteenth-century Norwegian immigrant, a tinsmith from Oslo named Johan Otto Nilssen (pronounced Nielsen) and Harriet Louisa Boyle, an Irish-Canadian from Windsor, Nova Scotia. The couple immigrated separately to the Boston area and married on February 9, 1868 when Johan (known in the United States as John Neilson) was thirty-three years old. The couple had four children who survived infancy and three others who did not. The surviving were Bertha (1870), Otto James Christian (1872), Charles Louis (1874), and William Henry (1877). Johan and Harriet came to the United States during a massive tide of European immigration in the early nineteenth century. Many of these immigrants from Scandinavia, Germany, and Ireland settled in the eastern seaboard cities of the United States in hope of finding work and a better life.[2]

The Neilsons landed in the old residential community of Medford in the northern part of Greater Boston. The staple recreation venue for the Neilsons was boating on the Mystic Lakes, twin reservoirs fed by the Mystic River. At nearby Winchester, William was a charter member of the Medford Boat Club, which became a focus of activity for the family. William was a Boston businessman, purchasing clothing from wholesalers and selling them to retailers. He married Anastasia Mahoney, a French Canadian from Montreal, Quebec, on June 21, 1909, and the couple had four children: William Henry II (1910), Elizabeth Anastasia (1911), Robert Charles (1915), and George Hutchinson (1922).[3]

William built a three-story home at 110 Sharon Street in West Medford for his growing family. It was an old, congested neighborhood. Houses were packed quite closely together, with little room for play. Anastasia was a sturdy woman, a registered nurse who instilled positive health practices in her children. The parents taught their children hard work and self-reliance. They also encouraged their children to get an education that extended

beyond high school. George delivered newspapers early in the morning from 1934 to 1939 to earn money for college. The parents were strict with the children, and both father and mother were strong figures in their lives. The values of the family were cemented in Roman Catholicism, hard work, and devotion to duty.

Work, though essentially a virtue, contributed to the early demise of father William. In 1936, he succumbed to angina, suffering a fatal heart attack at the age of fifty-nine. The loss of their father formed the cast that molded the Neilson children in a rugged commitment to success in life, and the fulfillment of William and Anastasia's wish that the children all pursue a college degree. The loss also engendered in George an abiding adoration of his mother, evident in the hundreds of letters written to her during his time in the service.

Another family tradition, at least for the Neilson men, was Boy Scouting. Each of the sons earned the Eagle rank, Scouting's highest honor. George and his brothers gained much outdoor experience at the local council's camp near Amesbury, Massachusetts. As an older scout, George also did some camping in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. The Mystic Lakes and the boat club provided for much of the family's recreational interests, including sail boating, canoeing, and ice boating. In addition to the elder William Neilson being a charter member, George worked there in the summers doing various hourly-wage jobs. He acquired quite a bit of responsibility as water safety demanded. The White Mountains was a favored retreat spot where the boys and Betty learned to ski. When it came to competitive sports, hockey was king in the Neilson home. Though George was passed over for the Medford High School hockey team, he continued to pursue the sport and lettered at Boston University. His brother Bob was also a B.U. hockey player. Betty, also a sports enthusiast, became a health and physical education teacher and coached field hockey and other women's sports.

George was not yet ten years old when the New York Stock Exchange collapsed in October 1929. In the years to follow, nothing came easy in America, and with the passing of father

William in 1936, the walls became greater that the children had to surmount in order to achieve the prosperity of the American Dream. They came of age in the Great Depression and had a deep appreciation for the value of work, financial saving, and wise investment of resources.

Young George's newspaper routes and scouting prepared him well for his future stint in the military. He gained the discipline and determination to meet his goals and survive during the war, as well as in the cutthroat world of corporate business during his later career. He had a combative spirit, a trait that was to be friend as well as foe at times. In any case, the loss of his father at age fourteen forced George to an extraordinary level of self-reliance. The sense of duty, honor, and achievement bred in the Neilson sons prepared them for how they would respond when their country faced the crisis that struck the nation when Pearl Harbor was attacked. The three brothers wasted little time in enlisting in the armed forces within six months of the disaster in Hawaii that thrust their country into world war.

In His Own Words

The following is a transcript of a small autobiographical piece that George wrote in Elkhart, Indiana, where he lived from 1973 until his passing in 1992. This was written in the last few years of his life, when he was in his mid to late sixties and was battling multiple myeloma.

George H. Neilson

Born at 110 Sharon Street, West Medford, on New Year's Day, 1922. George was the youngest of the four children of William H. and Anastasia Neilson. Mrs. Margaret Wright of Jerome St. assisted Mother Neilson with the childhood care, just as she had for the previous three. Mrs. Wright was a Negro, and senior member of a large family whose economic level was quite low.

Early Years and Experiences

[I] played and grew up between Sharon Street, Playstead Park, and the Medford Boat Club. On Sharon Street, there was Edward Lawson and on the lower end, Edward DiBerto and William Cliggott along with a number of negro children who lived in a group of three adjacent streets: Jerome, Arlington, etc. This section of two or three streets was one of only two sections of Negroes in the greater Boston area. In those days, the Negro children were generally a little poorer but we lived and played together as equals and there was no problem of getting along, of racism, etc.

I attended Grades one and two at The Hervey School, next to our home on Sharon St., grades three to six at the Brooks School in West Medford, junior high at the Hobbs School next to Brooks, and Medford High School, three and a half miles away in Medford Square. We all walked 90% of the time to these schools.

Being the last of four children, I followed suit to my two older brothers in many ways. We were all paper boys, working for Wilber's Paper Store as delivery boys in West Medford. We all became Eagle Boy Scouts. I was a member of Troop 8 under a very great man, Leslie P. Hinds. The troop met at the Brooks School, High Street, West Medford.

As a paper boy I started at the earliest possible time, age 12. My first route earned about $1.10 each week, plus maybe $.15 in tips after Saturday a.m. collections for a morning route. Sometimes I rode a bike; sometimes I walked and carried a sack. It was a routine for four years. I also had a Sunday route into a different section of town. A Sunday route involved pushing a wooden cart and was generally more profitable.

Our mentors were two: Miss Jennie Wilber who owned and ran an old stationery/candy/paper store in West Medford Square, and John Jackson who worked for Jennie and ran the paper delivery department. Jennie was a frugal and strict *old maid* who penalized you for being late for delivery. But, she was fair.

Boy Scouts involved passing all the tests, visiting troop meetings, hiking the nearby Middlesex Fells reservation, going

for two weeks of camping at Camp Fellsland in Amesbury, Massachusetts. This was the camp for the council, including the cities of Medford, Woburn, Winchester, Burlington, and Melrose. We all became Eagles. Mr. Hinds was a wonderful and generous leader of Troop 8 for many years. His kindly attitudes helped inspire me to do my best in scouts.

In scouting, I met George Ritchie, whose parents were wealthy. George's father stepped in front of a train at West Medford crossing in 1932, leaving the family well-off for those times.

After three summer seasons of camping at Camp Fellsland, I spent a fourth season as a kitchen helper to the camp cook, [with] Miss Little, a crotchety old biddy. It was drudgery, but I learned what kitchen work was from 6:00 a.m. until 7:30 p.m.

Other Youthful Activities

During my formative years, I joined with Eddie DiBerto, Edward Lawson, George Ritchie, Garner Hutchinson, Jimmy Comerord, and a number of the Negro boys from Jerome and Arlington streets, in playing baseball and football either at Playstead Park, a playground, or on the nearby marshes adjacent to the Mystic River. Billy Cliggot became a professional baseball player, rising to the Memphis Chicks in the professional ranks. Freddy Wakeham became a baseball player as well.

I put all my weekly earnings, religiously, into the Arlington 5-cents Savings Bank save a few pennies, beginning with my first paper route. These savings plus earnings at the Boat Club as steward provided much of the wherewithal to supplement mother Neilson's support to attend Boston University.

The only real enjoyments were ice cream cones, popsicles, etc. from the nearby "Little Store" (cones could be had for 1, 3, and 5 cents) or at Joe's Variety at the corner of Arlington and Boston Ave. Joe's was owned by a crotchety Joe D'Ardoomian. We all went there regularly for our candies and ice cream. A famous luxury was a sandwich of an old-fashion round mint crème patty with chocolate coating squashed onto a square popcorn bar.

Medford Boat Club

As a young boy, it was always a Sunday morning ritual to go with father to the Medford Boat Club, which sat on a parapet of land separating the upper and lower Mystic Lakes. There was also a dam that separated the lakes. The lakes lay on a parkland area belonging to the Metropolitan Park District, a very scenic area. Father Neilson had been a charter member of the Medford Boat Club (founded in 1898). During the period of its younger days, the club was devoted to canoe paddling, pleasure canoes, and racing canoes. The members used to compete with other nearby organizations for trophies. Some of the groups were *singles, tandems, fours,* and *war canoes* – 4 men to a boat.

There were famous names of those days, heroes of the paddling events, whom I used to see every week: Frank G. Trott, Heinie Perrin, Waldo Manson, Arthur G. Mather, Bill Cheatham, Arthur Donnellan, Charles Donnellan, all charter members of the club. Arthur Mather was an amateur wrestler, a big husky man who stayed in condition until his older age. He posed for the statue of the Minute Man at the Lexington Battle Green for sculptor Cyrus Dallin. During these days, the early 1930's, it was depression time. The club and the people were not seeing the best of times. Not much went on but horseshoe playing and porch-sitting.

In 1933, some of the members got together and rounded up plans for a class of sailboat known as the *Comet.* The boats, ten of them, were built by various members to form Fleet #5, with boats #31 to 41 in a class of sail boats which is known worldwide and probably number 40,000-50,000 boats. The *Comets* then cost about $700. to build, including the purchase of sails. So, at age 12, I became a crew on these boats during their racing schedule which became [visible] every Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning and afternoon. The racing became very sophisticated, and I learned much about sailing.

In 1938, brother Bill [was] commissioned to build No. 833 in the national fleet. Then, I became a crew and part-time sailor on

it. The boat was well built, but heavy. It won often and probably averaged second against 15 boats over the years preceding WWII.

Sailing and racing Comets were very influential in the development of the competitive instincts of my life. The Comet fleet was well-organized. There were trophies for various series of races.

As I grew from childhood, it became a habit to visit the Boat Club on weekends and during the week to enjoy swimming, canoeing, paddling, sailing, and caring for the boats. In the winter time, there were as many as ten ice boats, as Medford Boat Club had one of the very few fleets of ice boats in the whole nation, much less the East. There was a separate winter club building where the ice boats were stored and where a dirty floor room featured a hot stove where one could come in from ice boating and skating and get warm.

The senior members, old timers, all used to gather and talk on Sunday mornings and fill the room with pipe smoke. These old timers became balance wheels for me, after Father William Neilson, called *Curly* or *Billy* by his contemporaries, passed on August 15, 1936. Most notable was Frank G. Trott of Winchester, one of the founders of the club who owned several ice boats. He loved the lake and was sort of a watchdog of people and activities in the winter. Frank Trott was a harness horse racing writer for the Boston Globe and regarded as one of the best known writers on harness horses nationally.

When Father Neilson passed away, Frank Trott was a good friend to me, let me use his boat, etc. We spent lots of time talking.

Club Steward

During the pre-WWII years of 1939-41, I became steward of the club during the summer season. This included helping people launch their boats, cleaning the building, running the club store (candy and soft drinks), renting canoes, and generally helping out during major events. This called for a relaxed weekday's activity of keeping the place tidy, tending to people's needs, tending the

store, and a little sailing. On the weekends, it became hectic with all the people and their demands, visitors, passers-through, etc. Long a companion and often a helper on weekends was Edward T. "Eddie" DiBirto, who lived down the street, on Sharon Street. He and I walked and occasionally rode bikes for years the two miles back and forth, sometimes three times each day on weekends, often twice a day.

After World War II there were only occasional visits to the Boat Club. The last one in 1953. I haven't been back since, although the club prospers today, catering to residents of Medford, Winchester, and Arlington.

Many events, many happy days of my early years were spent at Medford Boat Club, probably from before I can remember until World War II changed the lives of all of us. Truly there are not all that many places like it anywhere where all of the opportunities for sportsmanship and competition exist for such reasonable costs and so conveniently located.

Hockey

I learned to enjoy ice hockey, being around the Mystic Lakes and the three ponds at the Brooks Estates where skating was available before the big lakes froze over. Hockey was well advanced in the Greater Boston area and most of the high schools had teams that played either in the Boston Garden or the Boston Arena. The two vital leagues, then, were Greater Boston Interscholastic League and Bay State League. I tried out for but was disappointed in not being accepted for the Medford High teams by Coach Al Lang. Medford had good teams, beginning with their original and championship teams of 1931-32. In my day, there were several who advanced to college teams: Charlie Stanley at Dartmouth, Billy Riley to Dartmouth, and Jack Riley to Dartmouth. Jack Riley was in the class of 1938 at Medford High School. He later became coach of the successful U.S. Olympic Team of 1960, the one previous to the U.S. success at Lake Placid in 1980 (Note: In

1980 the underdog U.S. team defeated the formidable team from the Soviet Union in the gold medal round).

I used to go regularly to the Boston Garden or the Boston Arena on Saturdays to see four games played. Then Mother and Father Neilson had season tickets to the Boston Bruins during the 1930s. This was one of the few luxuries of Father and Mother, and it served to cement and stimulate my everlasting interest in the game of ice hockey.

Another event of recreation that we enjoyed was skiing and tobogganing at the Brooks Estates, a large tract of land on the northern edge of West Medford that was the residue of a great Civil War estate of a wealthy family Brooks. By my time, the estate was dilapidated in terms of buildings, but the land offered generous hills and ponds for skating and for show events. Looking back, I had an opportunity to be with typically older people at the Medford Boat Club. Then, there were more schoolmates that we met at the Brooks Estates.

Boston University

I applied for Boston University because it seemed appropriate to follow along with my brothers and sister. But I had no purpose in mind. I pointed towards accounting, because Boston University College of Business Administration was famous for that. When I entered B.U., I went to the Business School building which was the first class in the cornerstone building in the new campus which today stretches from Kenmore Square to Commonwealth Armory and beyond B.U. stadium.

My experience at B.U. was uneventful as I look back. I was a "B" student. My experience was that of a commuter, back and forth from Medford on the bus and subway system. I worked in the Business School Library under a student aid program. We got paid $.40 per hour then.

I was pleased to be able to play hockey, beginning with freshman year. We practiced in the morning at the Boston Arena before class. We played New Hampshire, Maine, Colby, M.I.T.,

Boston College, and West Point. In my sophomore year, I played defense for the varsity and earned my letter. My most famous event was playing for a full 60 minutes one night against Boston College. Boston University had one of the first college hockey teams in the U.S. in the late 1920's following Dartmouth, New Hampshire, Maine, and the Ivy League colleges.

As a tribute to what you can do in a day's time, during my senior year before graduating, I played hockey, worked on the Manhattan Project at M.I.T., and attended a full curriculum of classes. This kind of experience in younger life serves to expand one's capacities for responsibility in later years. Also in the summer preceding graduation, I went to summer school to accomplish the first half of my senior year, also working at M.I.T. on a project that later turned out to be instrumental in the Manhattan Project, leading to the development of the first atomic bomb.

During my experience at B.U., I met Joseph Hughes of Newtonville, Mass., who later turned out to be a friend and fellow-member of the Air Force, though he was a meteorological officer. As we approached our senior year at B.U., the threat of being called into military service faced us all. So Joe and I both signed up for the Air Force. I was very pleased to have been accepted for Flying Training. Many of us were given to understand that we could finish our full year of college in 1943, when we signed up (my sign-up was May 25, 1942). Fortunately, most of us decided to take a summer session, so we were called in February of 1943, just after graduating in January, 1943.[4]

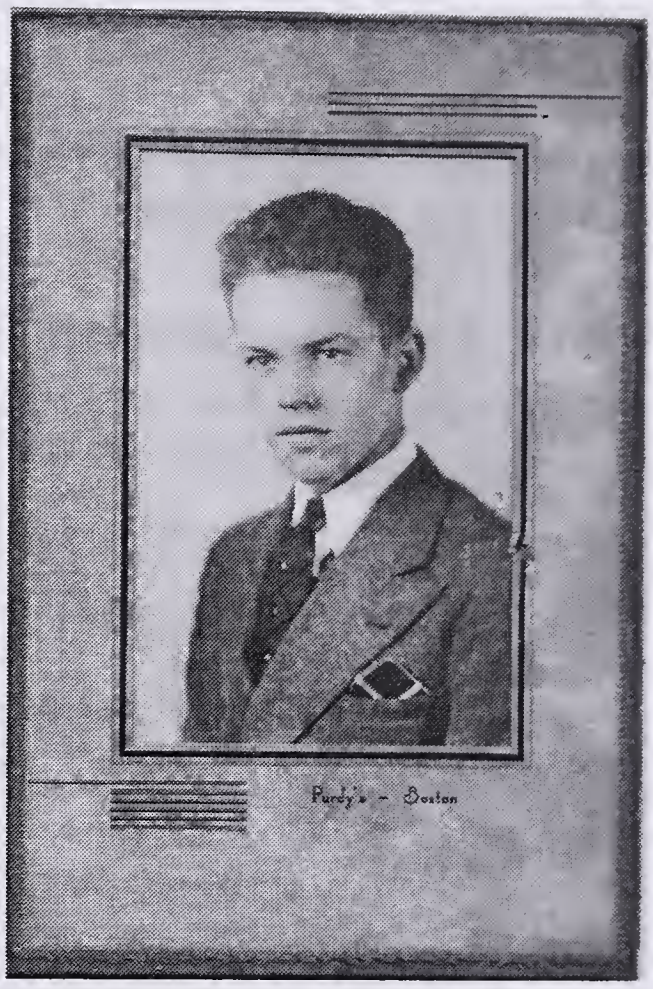
Anastasia Neilson ("Ma")

Elizabeth (Betty) Neilson
and Robert (Bob) Neilson

George Neilson (far left) at Boy Scout
camp, Amesbury, Massachusetts

Betty Neilson

William H. (Bill) Neilson, Jr.
Bill was known in the Neilson family was "Junior."



George Neilson high school graduation photo, 1939.

Photo of Ma Neilson that George carried with him while he was in the USAAF

Chapter 3

Enlistment and the Manhattan Project

Boston, Massachusetts

America's Profound Isolation

The experience of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) along with the inconclusive end of the First World War left most Americans disillusioned with their nation's experiment in international cooperation. The Great War had disintegrated the empires of the Central powers, but the redrawn borders rendered the continent a house of cards. The creation of new states such as Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia ignored ethnic regions. The disarmament of Germany left a power vacuum in the heart of the continent. Oppressive reparations exacted on the fledgling Weimar Republic by the Versailles Treaty not only reduced Germany to a pariah state but sowed the discontent that led to extremist political activity.

On the Allied side, the war left the imperial nations of Western Europe (France, Belgium, Holland, and Great Britain) weakened and broke, their grip on their global colonies tenuous. When inflation and depression engulfed the world in the 1930s, the Axis powers turned to rearmament to revive their economies and realign the balance of powers.

The United States Congress had rejected membership in Woodrow Wilson's League of Nations, signaling a return to its prewar isolation. Even the Western European democracies stood quietly by as Germany under the Nazis began overstepping the terms of Versailles by rearming, remilitarizing the Rhineland, and insatiably annexing ethnic German territories lost with the armistice of 11-11-18. Italy under the Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini began wars of colonial conquest in Abyssinia (Ethiopia) and elsewhere

in East and Mediterranean Africa. Japan continued to expand its empire in Southeast Asia and the Pacific region.

There was in America an abhorrence of war and a determination not to get entangled again in foreign affairs. Taking solace in the vast oceans that buffered the nation, Americans saw no reason why the rumblings in Europe should concern them. From 1935 to 1939, Congress passed a series of neutrality acts that prevented American companies from selling weapons to foreign governments. In part, this was due to resentment over the fact that the WWI arms trade had bred 23,000 new US millionaires who had fed off the lucrative armaments industry.[1]

President Franklin D. Roosevelt saw the gathering storm abroad and sought to awaken the country to the need for building the nation's defenses, which had badly atrophied since 1918. Criticized as "war mongering," Roosevelt in a 1937 speech referred to an "epidemic of world lawlessness" that would spread like a contagious disease, which, unless contained by nations including the United States, threatened "the very foundations of civilization."[2] Juxtaposed against the growing might of the German and Japanese arsenals were America's weak and obsolete army and navy, which included its underequipped Air Corps. Overy[3] asserted that in the 1930s, following twenty years of disarmament, the US military was ranked eighteenth in the world. Despite Roosevelt's seeing trouble over the horizon, which America would be unable to escape, change was difficult. Unlike in the dictatorships of Germany and the Soviet Union in which a despot could enact rearmament by decree, the American system required the building of bipartisan coalitions, the winning of elections, and selling ideas to the people.

Stated Overy,[4]

> When war broke out the United States was still a predominantly civilian economy, with a small apparatus of state, low taxes, and a military establishment that had only reached the foothills of re-equipment. America faced states which had

> been arming heavily for eight or nine years and now had more than half their national product devoted to the waging of war. American leaders were conscious of how much there was to catch up.

Looking Back from the Vast Future

George Neilson's late-life memoirs, composed forty-six years after the end of World War II, begin with his description of the rush for young people to enlist in the armed services. He wrote at the start of his fifty-nine-page memoir, *A World War II Experience,* of a *home front* just three years removed from the entrenched isolationism described above. What brought about the dramatic turnaround from a popular sentiment of nonengagement to total mobilization of American society to a war footing? George provides his own insights.

In addition to my father's military service, of significance is his participation before entering the army in a highly classified government activity code named the Manhattan Project. It was not until the end of World War II that George and the rest of the world learned that the Manhattan Project was a secret weapons research program to develop the atomic bomb. It is ironic that, for all George's service in the Army Air Corps, the long months of training and the twenty-eight combat missions, it was the Manhattan Project that produced the key to ending the long and bloody intercontinental conflict. George did not learn of the outcome of the MIT part of the project until a happenstance encounter with a nuclear scientist on a domestic airline flight forty years later.

As in this chapter, all succeeding chapters begin with a summary of background history roughly corresponding with the chronology of the George H. Neilson story, followed by pertinent excerpts from Neilson's 1991 *A World War II Experience*. Each such segment from the memoir concludes with the citation "G.H.N., 1991."

Perspective: 1939-1942

During the late 1930's Germany had been expanding through the takeover of many European countries and the drum-beats of war were at a distance to most young men aspiring to education and a college career. It was not of too much concern to most, and apparently so with the nation's leaders. Thus, I entered Boston University in the fall of 1939, unconcerned. I took part in the usual activities of the period: after-school work, commuting from the home city of Medford by bus and trolley, sports (hockey in my case), and summer work.

During the winter of 1942 the national draft was in effect. Typical lunch-time and after-school discussions related to "how this will affect us." The government overview was that they publicized the fact that they wanted college students to finish their schooling before going into the service.

The attack on Pearl Harbor by Japan on December 7, 1941 naturally increased the draft calls from the various districts of the nation. It also increased the speculation of college students with regard to possible changes of the rules for the various channels available for people to enter the service. As of the spring of 1942, I was a junior at the College of Business Administration at Boston University. So it became a matter of how to deal with the *hope* that the government would allow college students to finish their degrees before being called to active duty as the pressure for bigger draft calls mounted.

By early spring, my associates at Boston University were ferreting out available programs for college students to enlist in that would enable them to complete their four-year career before call-up. There were a number of them offered by the various service branches: Army, Navy, and Marines. The Air Corps was a branch of the Army at the time. As various classmates found programs, shuffled through them and signed up, I observed the various analyses of the opportunities by the students as I worked towards a decision on my own fate. At that point, it seemed like a competitive atmosphere with everyone seeking the program

that offered the best opportunities for advancement, with the assumption that all programs would lead to officer commissions as second lieutenants.

As I dealt with this competition, I did not want to be left out. My biggest fear was of applying and not being accepted. This fear was based primarily on the fact that I did not have the best set of teeth. The play-back from the applicants, typically, and especially from the Navy service of supply, was that you had to have *perfect teeth.* I was doting over the fact that as a result of my fear and dislikes for dentists, they used to have to chase me around the block to make me keep my dentist's appointments. As a result, I lost some teeth that the family dentist, Dr. Groff, insisted I would not have lost if I had paid more attention to taking care of them. My memory was vivid of the proclamation he made to me when I was about 15: *You will never have to worry about being taken into the service because your teeth are not good enough.* So now, in the spring of 1942, I was wishing for them to be good enough. (G.H.N., 1991)[5]

George's brother Bob wrote him a letter, apparently from his post in the South Pacific, dated January 9, 1942, offering his perspectives on his brother's options. This was written one month after Pearl Harbor.

> Very shortly you will graduate from C.B.A. [College of Business Administration], the culmination of an effort carried over 2 ½ years.
>
> You are to be congratulated for your courage in studying excessive hours in order to graduate six months ahead of time, thus adding your weight to the war effort in an exemplary manner.
>
> The fine record you attained at B.U. is yours, a possession that will wear as a suit of clothes. Guard it well and carry it on into the troubled world you are now facing and continue the success throughout your life's work.

> Do not be hasty in your zeal to enter the armed service. You have your responsibility to Mother, as to your country. When the time comes that you should go then come + give it all you have as I know you will.
>
> I hope you will wait as a personal favor to go into the Air Corps until next June, if that is possible.
>
> Meanwhile thank mother for me for the lovely Christmas present. Betty for the continuous loyal letters.
>
> I sincerely trust that during the coming year God may grant us the peace. It is coming and we all can feel it now.
>
> Very Sincerely, Bob – R.C. Neilson[6]

Little did Bob or anyone imagine at the time that the wished-for peace was still three and a half years away.

Following the attack at Pearl Harbor, the mood of the nation was crystallized in support of the war effort. Young men flocked to enlistment centers to be part of the action and do their patriotic duty. It was not a matter of *if* but *when* they would go.

Enlistment – May 25, 1942

I applied for and was accepted as an aviation cadet in the Army Air Corps on May 25, 1942. The only physical recheck was for a potential hernia that never did develop and for which I was continually rechecked as I went through various stages of the service. In those days, many people were anxious to find a way to get deferred, for physical or other reasons. For this *achievement*, I received an ignominious slip of paper as a record confirmation with the oral indication that I would not be called until I graduated from college in June, 1943. I felt relieved momentarily, to have gotten my fears of non-acceptance behind me.

Meanwhile, also in May, 1942, the College of Business Administration at Boston University decided to have summer school to accomplish a semester and move graduation forward to January, 1943 for those who sought to better insure their opportunity to finish before call-up. Most of those who were heading to the service took the opportunity. I did, and was able later to reflect on much satisfaction from it.

The Manhattan Project

As school ended in August, 1942, the desire for work took on greater priority to fill the gap in time before the fall semester. A notice on the employment office bulletin board indicated a job at M.I.T., (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) across the river. My close associate and later to be life-long friend Joe Hughes and I applied for it. We were accepted.

The job involved handling a very dense and dusty material down in the basement at M.I.T. in the area where a 200,000 lb. press was available. There was a small group of engineers who deal[t] with minerals from the University of Chicago as well as a group of six workers hidden behind a roughly boarded-up room with a permanent security guard down in the bowels of M.I.T. Cans of this dense, dusty material were brought in from a company called Medal Hydrides Corp., Gloucester, Mass. The material was brought in coffee cans under dry ice refrigeration. A half-full two lb. coffee can (of the substance) often weighed 20 lb. and a full one could weigh 35 lb. It was kept in a dry ice refrigerator in the enclosure where we worked.

Our job, Joe and I, was to load up stainless steel molds with an amount of this material which fit into an inch-square opening to a height of six to eight inches. Then an inch-square plunger was inserted at the top of the mold. The whole device was inserted under the press, which applied different degrees of pressure up to 180,000 psi. The result was a yeast-cake size configuration approximately three-eighths inch high. When these units came out of the mold, they were immediately put on sheets of dry ice.

We did this all day long as if we were making candy squares. While we wore face masks, there was not a lot of emphasis or concern for health. Handling the material resulted in the air being so thick with dust that you felt you could write your initials with your fingers in the air.

We worked eight-hour shifts. We were paid $1.00 per hour which was unheard of at the time. Typically pay was $.35 to $.40 an hour. Sometimes there was no material to work with. Then, they telegrammed us not to report. But we still got paid, also unheard of, at the same time. Sometimes one of us would be sent for supplies, like carbon tetrachloride to clean the mold. In these cases, we were given a few extra dollars and told to keep the change, again, amazing events at the time. We were treated very well by the project managers, engineers, and research people from the University of Chicago.

This project was very invisible to the public with the admonition to be secretive. It ended in October without much fanfare. Then, there was a month hiatus.

In November, 1942 we were recalled as the project entered a different phase. This time, they were putting the material into a vacuum furnace, heating it to 2,750 degrees Centigrade, and then poured into four-at-a-time elongated, cylindrical graphite molds. We had the same location and the same scene of the air being filled with dust.

When the molds cooled, the ingots looked like brass. They were sawed into slices about three-quarter inch thick and about two inches wide, the diameter of the molds. The ingot slices were engraved with numbers and sent off to the University of Chicago. We heard no more about what the purpose was.

I kept this job on the night shift until I graduated from B.U. on January 13, 1943. So during the fall of 1942 I carried a full semester of studies while working a full shift on the project at M.I.T. Also, I managed to play on the varsity hockey team, which I had done for two previous years. This meant sometimes going from M.I.T. in the early morning after work and without sleep to practice hockey at the Boston Arena. Boston University, which was

one of the first college hockey teams, usually with a good schedule of other prestigious teams in the then college hockey world, had priority for hockey practice at the Boston Arena, 7:00 a.m. M.I.T. practiced at 5:00 and Boston College at 6:00. So I grabbed sleep when I could and occasionally took off from work when there was a hockey game scheduled. Thus it was a highlight of my life to carry on a full semester load at college, work eight hours, and play on the varsity hockey team. The net of it was good performance at school and much satisfaction with being able to do the whole schedule. It motivated me to realize that a person can push himself to do most anything he wants if it suits his goals and purposes. There was a number of occasions when this experience proved valuable as life moved along.

I had an opportunity to stay with the M.I.T. project and thus avoid military service. Dr. Shipman, project coordinator at M.I.T. told me the project was vital and that they could get me relieved of my Air Corps commitment. I reasoned that I was only a worker, a slave in the project and could not be a significant contributor to a scientific activity where metallurgists were in charge. I did not accept this offer. I left the project on January 31. My recall was for February 6, and I had been given three weeks' notice prior to that.

In October, 1945, after the war had ended, I got a letter thanking me for my service on the Manhattan Project, which was to develop the first atom bomb. It was not until approximately 1982 when I was seated on an airplane returning from New York to Chicago next to a scientist at the Argonne Nuclear Laboratory in Chicago that I learned that the project at M.I.T. did, in fact, evolve the proper stabilization of U-235 uranium material. The slices of the vacuum-melted uranium were stable and they were used to prove the possibility of the atom bomb during the so-called Fermi experiment underneath the stadium at the University of Chicago in 1943. From there, they developed the full-scale project at Los Alamos, New Mexico. This scientist had learned this in his studies and research and was able to confirm what my experience had achieved. The earlier experiment, with the pressure technique was not successful. The yeast-cake size units melted, burned,

and were generally unstable and did not lend themselves to being handled for the use intended.

Life is full of events, crises, frustrations, defeats, and accomplishments. It is interesting to realize that my small, deservedly unnoticed activity with respect to the Manhattan Project could have been part of a vital contribution to the World War II effort without realizing it until after the war. Then, to get confirmation of what the project did contribute about 40 years later during a casual visit with a nuclear physicist on an airplane trip, comes under the heading of *You never know.* (G.H.N., 1991)[7]

Chapter 4

Induction into the Army

U.S.A.A.F Reception Center
Atlantic City, New Jersey

The Giant Awakes: From Isolation to Rearmament

Despite the preponderance of resistance to Roosevelt's plea for rearmament, history was on the side of the president's vision. Following the one-month German blitzkrieg that crushed Poland in September 1939, eight months of lull ensued, a period known as the *phony war* or *sitzkrieg* (sitting war).[1] Many were convinced that Hitler's lust for territory had been satisfied. In April of the following year, such hopes were dashed as the Nazi Juggernaut swept over Denmark and Norway. As the former's land holdings included Greenland, this put the swastika much nearer to North America, giving pause to isolationists.

In May 1940, the world looked on as Hitler's divisions, like the Kaiser's of the previous generation, invaded Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands and crossed the French frontier from the northeast. This invasion route, following what was known as the Schlieffen Plan used at the start of World War I, rendered the highly fortified Maginot Line between Germany and France irrelevant. France's mainstay defense against Nazi aggression was bypassed. The campaign, so swift and catastrophic for the Allies, stunned the world. Any illusion that Germany planned only a limited campaign to avenge Versailles was dashed as the freedom of the world hung in the balances. Following their gallant effort to save France, the stunned armies of Britain and her allies were driven to the channel coast when the German advance suddenly halted. Though 340,000 British, French, and Belgian troops were evacuated over nine days of Operation Dynamo by a gigantic

flotilla of military and civilian boats, much of the Royal Army's heavy equipment and armaments was abandoned at Dunkirk. It was a military disaster that left Britain virtually defenseless. France surrendered on June 22.[2]

The shockwave of the blitzkrieg and Dunkirk ruptured America's shell of isolation.

> Throughout the nation the news had a galvanizing effect. "To many a U.S. citizen," reported *Time*, "the screaming headlines of the German smash through Belgium and down into France came like an unremitting, seven-day Orson Welles broadcast of an invasion from Mars."[3]

Editor Felix Morley of the *Washington Post* struck the note Roosevelt wanted to hear. "Neutrality has no meaning when such a merciless military machine is in full operation," he wrote. "...No country can possibly be indifferent...Nor can it be said realistically that the U.S. is any longer neutral."[4]

The disaster in Europe precipitated public support for sending armaments to England and France. In December 1940, FDR promised to make the United States the "Arsenal of Democracy." Through the Lend-Lease and Victory Programs approved in 1941, US arms were sent to Allied nations, including the Soviet Union, as deferred loans. Production was increased geometrically.[5]

The challenge facing American industry was to convert industries from producing peacetime goods to making armaments. As it turned out, US industry was uniquely fitted to this task. The great depth of technological and organizational skill of US industrialists enabled them to make America the leader in "the war of machines," to use Stalin's term. The Roosevelt administration, by fostering the natural competitiveness and ingenuity of great corporations, was able to get the country working for the cause.[6] This also required the forging of a multidimensional consensus: Republicans and Democrats, labor and management, military

and civilian. The War Production Board, the Controlled Materials Plan, and the Manpower Commission were established to provide the government structures needed to partner with industry and counterbalance market forces for the expediency of the task.

The nation's largest corporations played a dominant role, as they had the capacity to convert production from a civilian to a military capacity.[7] Two huge production projects represent the enormity of the rearmament effort. One was the Liberty Ships, the first initiative in the mass production of shipbuilding. Under West Coast shipbuilder Henry Kaiser, massive dry docks known as "ways" were constructed, and the time to build a ship was reduced from 355 days to forty-one and fewer.[8] Another gargantuan project was Willow Run. At Washington's urging, legendary automaker Henry Ford undertook the ultimate challenge to build airplanes using mass production. The finished plant, designed to produce a B-24 bomber each hour, was the largest manufacturing facility in the world, with a mile-long assembly line. Willow Run became an industry standard between 1941 and 1944. National production of armaments soon outpaced Germany and Japan by a factor of two and four per worker respectively.[9]

Due to the success of the war industry, the entire economy prospered. Lagging unemployment from the Great Depression disappeared as America got back to work. Nine million previously unemployed workers and another fourteen million women were absorbed into the work force. Rosie the Riveter symbolized the mobilization of American women in the war effort. Because of this new prosperity, home-front rationing was limited in the United States, with gasoline being one product that was regulated. It was not all a panacea. There were five thousand labor strikes in 1944 alone. A massive migration of poor southerners to the north, primarily Michigan, resulted in racial tension and a housing shortage.[10]

During the war, half a million new businesses started in the United States, a new generation of entrepreneurism where workers became bosses overnight. It was truly a second industrial revolution born of necessity and laying the footings of an

unprecedented postwar prosperity. Capitalism fueled the engine that drove this industrial renaissance.[11]

The German armaments industry, though brilliantly conceived under the leadership of Hitler's armaments minister Albert Speer, lived in a political purgatory between that of the United States and the Soviet Union.

Overy[12] summed up the results of the World War II armaments race:

> By 1943 there existed a decisive disparity between the quantity and equipment available to the Allies and the output of their enemies, Italy, Germany, and Japan: more than three to one in aircraft and tanks, four to one in heavy guns.

One month after Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt in his State of the Union speech called for the production of 60,000 planes for 1942 and 125,000 for 1943, 42,000 tanks for 1942 and 75,000 for 1943. The list went on, and the reaction by many quarters was utter disbelief.[13] Time was to prove that these were not exaggerations or fantasies. As Overy[14] wrote:

> In four years these plans turned America from military weakling to military super-power. American industry produced during the war: 297,000 aircraft, 193,000 artillery pieces, 86,000 tanks, and 2 million army trucks. In four years American industrial production, already the world's largest, doubled in size ...Where every other state took four or five years to develop a sizeable military economy, it took America a year.

From Civilian to Soldier

Considering my own induction into the army in 1972 with my father's 1943 version, it became apparent that the process of

turning a civilian into a soldier is a timeless ritual. In fact, it is not unlike the Hollywood interpretation: at times frightening, at times absurd, and at times even humorous. A young person is never fully prepared for what happens at the induction station, let alone what follows. Whether intentional or unintentional, the impersonal, assembly-line approach to induction into the armed forces results in stripping one of his personal identity and casting him as a cog in the wheel of a vast machine. The ordeal is humiliating and painful but also necessary so that a soldier can learn to function as part of a team, placing its interest above one's own.

George reported to Atlantic City, New Jersey. In those days, the town was the Las Vegas of the east, its famous boardwalk a symbol of the town's reputation as a beach resort complete with luxury hotels, casinos, and other types of entertainment. So it seems ironic that the famed resort town would be an army induction station with all the annoying experiences that go with that.

"Dear Mother, Well, I'm in the army now," the young George wrote to his mother the day after arrival at the reception center at Atlantic City. He went on to describe his inglorious introduction to military life:

Camp Boardwalk

First, the train crawled to "Camp Boardwalk," not arriving until 6:30 on Friday. It was drizzly. We stood and marched and stood, in the elements of course, until 8:30 when we were fed a scrawny meal, under awkward conditions. It was not until 11:00 that we had been issued bedding + were assigned, in groups, to hotels. You should have seen us lugging the bags, together with comforters, blanket, pillow, + sheet through the streets. I thought we would drop from fatigue, by that time. (All the time I was thinking how warm I was with my muffler, hat, wool, socks etc. which you always so thoughtfully provide.) The other boys nearly froze to death. (2/27/43)

As in many of his letters home, which he wrote faithfully nearly every day during his time in the service, he reminds his mother of his appreciation for her and her superior cooking as well as painting detailed pictures of daily life in the service. The latter ranged from the spectacular to the mundane. George had a good handle on the English language and a broad vocabulary, but he had some quirks in writing. He was especially fond of the comma, the ellipsis, the colon, and the hyphen. I have transcribed his letters as he wrote them with only nominal adjustments for readability.

George's mother saved all of his letters and returned them to him when he got married. The letters were kept in orange letterboxes in basements and garages wherever the family lived for nearly five decades. His wife, Dorothy, kept them after he passed away in 1992 and bequeathed them to me in 2012 upon my expression of interest in them. The collection appeared to have been undisturbed in over half a century. In addition to preserving the letters for longevity, I felt compelled to tell the amazing story buried within this treasure trove of history, including thousands of handwritten pages.

During time of war, such as 1942, temporary processing stations were created to deal with the large volume of troops entering the armed forces. Atlantic City was one of these. Beachfront hotels were definitely the exception with respect to soldier billeting. This was one of the many paradoxes that occurs in the military.

The induction center's purpose is to outfit soldiers with a haircut, uniforms, dog-tags, immunizations, and basic equipment such as canteens, and helmets. This outfitting, which usually takes about a week, is done assembly-line style. Transportation from place to place is characteristically primitive, accommodations crowded, and the whole experience can be summed up with the phrase, "Hurry up and wait." In addition to supply issue, the induction station gives the recruit a taste of military order. Recruits march everywhere they go, polish their boots, salute, and call

cadence. It takes about two minutes after arrival at the induction center to discover some of the apparent absurdities of soldier life:

> Today we got up at 4:00 a.m. – made our bunks, + waited till 5:00, when we ate breakfast. This was only a shade better than the previous meal. Then we stood in the drizzle of snow until 8:30, where the boys nearly froze. There is no one in particular in charge of us. At this point, we are our own leaders, after having other cadets show us around.
>
> We marched 2 miles down the "walk" in the morning + went through a physical exam. We marched back, arriving at 12:00 noon. Something drastic went wrong + we were not taken to noon mess (not being led by anyone). As it turned out, we did not eat until 6:00 P.M., after a 13 hours interval. (2/27/43)

This was only one of a plethora of episodes that George experienced at Atlantic City and throughout his time in the military. A soldier finds himself living in a world of contradictions and he perceives it as an organized program of harassment. George referred to this at times as "the plot." More than likely, it is less a deliberate plan than just a government operation in which efficiency is an elusive goal. Efficiency in the military, as in a socialist state, is diminished where everyone is guaranteed at least a job and minimal compensation whether or not one's work is adequate or superior. Conversely, it appears to be different during actual combat, when soldiers are motivated not by material rewards but by survival itself. In such cases, people and groups seem to achieve things even beyond their natural limits because they reach deeply into their wells of courage, work together, and accomplish things they never otherwise could have. Not to deny credit to the spirit of man, it must also be given that adrenaline plays a role.

ENTERING THE SERVICE

My graduation from Boston University was on January 13, 1943. My call-up to the Air Corps came on January 20, with a

reporting date of February 12. At this point, the war was serious; my two brothers, Bill and Bob were already in the service. So, I was anxious to get going. The feeling around home and the community, to me, became one of great desire to get going for it seemed like a waste of time to consider doing anything else.

My orders were to report to the Reception Center at Atlantic City, New Jersey. So I departed on a train at the South Station in Boston, lonesome already, and tearful from having said good-bye to my mother and sister, Betty. This, except for two summertime encampments at the Boy Scout Camp at Amesbury, Mass. was going to be my first trip away from home of any significant distance. Before the train ride had become too old, I encountered other lonesome souls who appeared headed the same way as me, so by the time I got to Atlantic City I was already in a group.

After being herded off the train, we were *booked* and marched in groups to the Atlantic City Convention Center which served as a staging area to provide our basic military clothing, fit or no fit. Having been fitted out, with our civilian clothes in a duffle bag, we were marched to our quarters which was in the Chalfonte Hotel, one of the great old hotels that make up the tradition of Atlantic City's Boardwalk scene. On the way to the convention center, we were greeted by groups who already had their military garb as *Jeeps*. So while leaving the center with our newly acquired military uniforms, we had the privilege of calling off to other newly arriving groups, *Jeeps,* the first opportunity to show rank.

TRAINING STAGE NO. 1: RECRUIT RECEPTION CENTER, ATLANTIC CITY – 3 WEEKS

The period here was strictly to integrate, orient, and organize us as military personnel: getting our histories and records into the books, etc. The conditions were miserable because large numbers of personnel were being processed in buildings not designed to accommodate this sort of thing. For example, the ballrooms were made into large sleeping areas with double-deck bunks. We waited in long lines for two hours sometimes to get fed and at odd times

of the day. Often for chow, to get paid, or for record-keeping we waited in lines outside of the hotels on side streets with the moist, cold February winds blowing in off the ocean, making it cold and damp.

Physically, there were outbreaks of meningitis, causing delirium in some and lots of colds and pneumonia, as the authorities attempted to get large numbers of people into shape under unorthodox arrangements called *brigantine,* where there was a recreational field where we were forced to do calisthenics, with most of us being both not ready for the activity and/or suffering from cold, etc. One of the memorable results of this was that some of the fellows slipped off the rope used to swing across a brook only to fall into the stream, and then to march back to the hotel cold and wet.

This period evoked lonesomeness (homesickness) as well as discouragement, plus the continual realization of not knowing what was going to happen next. Possibly everyone entering the service experiences this kind of reaction wherever and whenever this might be. (G.H.N. 1991)[15]

In his next letter, though lamenting certain challenges, George shows his determination to fight homesickness and stand up to the situation.

I don't know what the score is yet

I am in a comfortable hotel, where we are restricted except for meals or other unit details. Thus, I could not yet telephone. But, I will when I can. They gave us our summer suits and everything. Our work clothes are like one piece mechanic suits, except they are heavy (pale green). Today, we rested all day between meals. We attended Catholic mass in the palatial Stanley Theater on the boardwalk. We will not be allowed to leave the hotel except in unit for some time to browse around. I don't know what the score is yet. Neither do any of the boys. There are in the hotel, all high class boys. Princeton, Harvard, Yale, etc.

The latest rumor says that we will be here 20 days or so. We have had no shots as yet. We also will get lectures, drill calisthenics, etc. But, it all appears as a jumble, now.

Food has been good I guess. But it can never be like home. One boy said that he never had food so good at home. But, I will never say that. We have ice cream each day. We can eat all we want, but we must eat all we take of everything. I'm still trying to tear myself away from home. I worry about you worrying about the 3 of us in the service. But I guess that they will break us of that. So long now for a while. I'm not homesick. I won't let that happen. (2/28/43)

We are treated like dogs

Well things look pretty good today. We went to a great convention hall in the a.m., for lectures. In the afternoon, we drilled for 2 hrs., then we did calisthenics and games on the Boardwalk for 2 more. (Rather, we were on the beach in front of the Boardwalk.) Then we drilled for one more hour. The day was beautiful. It was brisk and the salt air on the beach was invigorating. We have to stay together at all times. As potential aviation cadets, we are treated like dogs by the permanent part of the camp. They hate us because we are looking forward to advancement. We have not got to the allotment desk yet. But it is assured that we are obliged to buy a bond per month, and pay $6. for insurance until we get to pre-flight. (3/1/43)

The painful metamorphosis from civilian to soldier has its symbolic rituals. For example, sending home street clothes has a psychological effect on the recruit, because they represent the last vestige of civilian life. For the new soldier struggling to adjust to a radically new life, it is well that humans are such adaptable beings. Each day that one is in the army, this new world seems more normal as the old life recedes into the past. In the early days, the memories of one's past life are still very fresh and one wrestles mentally in reconciling the loss. After a few days in Atlantic City, George was beginning to find a new surge of energy that he referred to as "invigorating." He was beginning to accept

army life, though the transition takes many weeks or months to complete. In another sense, most never completely adapt. Those who do, become career soldiers. It is important for the soldier to regularly remind himself that this is a temporary life, and one day he will return to the permanent one, albeit that life will never be the same again.

One thing that helps the soldier endure even the most awful parts of military life is a sense that he (or she) is part of something greater than himself, that he is conquering a great challenge, and that he belongs to something that is heroic, powerful, and just. Except when a war is exceedingly unpopular, most people love their soldiers, and this is felt by servicemen.

To his sister, Elizabeth (Betty), the new recruit wrote:

Well, I'm in the army now. We are so restricted that we move nowhere, without the group. The only spare minutes we have are spent at our bed. Things looked good on Monday. But, today, it is drizzling a cold snow + we still drill + do calisthenics on the beach. Everybody was cold, before dinner. We have moved from the fine Lafayette to an ex-dining hall in the Chalfonte, where we have no private rooms + toilet facilities are inadequate – two toilets for 125.

None of my pals are happy. We are all tired + are too upset for anything. We are at the Calfonte, North Carolina Ave. + the Boardwalk at the foot of the Steel Pier. Glenn Miller's arranged + directed band is at supper twice a week. I will tell all, as I think of it, but I have to go now. (3/3/43)

George complained of many of the typical hassles in the "green machine": long lines, harassment, and injustice. In his next letters, he admits to feeling some homesickness. His desire to please his widowed mother is a regular theme in his letters.

Right now, I feel pretty low

I guess you've done more than your duty to us. I hope I will be able to bring more credit to you, later. You've been in the background long enough.

Right now, I feel pretty low, because, they seem to not care how they treat us. I wouldn't mind but privates + corporals are left with our charge. Today, we had two exams, which lasted for a total of 5 solid hours. Then, we had an interview in which we gave our entire background (school, work, sports, scouting, etc.) Then I had to hang around all afternoon with other fellows, and have a special interview, because you were born in a foreign country. I told them it was only a simple situation, unlike other parents who were immigrants; but they made me wait in line for 3 hours to do it.

On going from place to place, we go to various hotels + lecture halls, including the mammoth Convention hall, which consists of several big auditoriums + and a great hall far bigger than Boston Arena. We march to and fro along the Boardwalk, + and we all sing rhythmic songs. This is the only spirited phase of the affair, so far. Then, we stand in windy alleys, + wait for dumb non-coms to decide what we're supposed to do.

Tomorrow, I expect my "shots," but that is the least of my worries. I hope to get out + get some physical exhaustion so that I can forget worrying about you. I'm tired now, due to lack of sleep, nervous tension + the feeling of disheartedness.

About following your advice, I've always tried to + can bet that I know there is none better. This is what I miss, most. But, I'm not worried about getting in trouble, since I'm confined, for now. (3/4/43)

That letter he signed "more love than ever," suggesting the degree that he needed the strength of his mother's love in the difficult situation he was in. This situation, of course, would pale in comparison to the events to follow in the coming two years, for which he became steeled in the meantime. The military is one of those experiences that takes you apart through the rough and tumble, then forces you to put yourself back together to survive it. What results from this reconstruction is a stronger, more resilient person.

That fine thoughtful package

I received 5 letters, this morning, (2 from you, 2 from Betty, + one from Junior dated Monday). These were undoubtedly delayed by the

shifting of addresses. Thanks a lot for the nice clippings of the Bruins' games from Betty. Boy, they hit the spot. They made us (the boys, you know Lisakis, my roommate, played on the hockey team with me, while I was out this winter) feel right at home. Too bad about Chamberlin.

But that's not all. I have right here, that fine, thoughtful, package. Lisakis got one too, but not like mine, so we're all set. The hermits* are fresh, the peanuts + chocolate are good, but there's nothing like those home-made patties. I have not eaten any, yet; I haven't dug all the way down. You really think of everything, Ma. I hope I will make you proud of me. (3/6/43)

*Hermits are an old New England bar cookie made of molasses, cinnamon, nutmeg, ginger, cloves, and raisins that have good keeping qualities. Tins of hermits were a favorite of sailors on clipper ships that traveled the world.

About yelling at you…

I got my G.I. haircut Thursday. Some boys are almost bald; But mine is no shorter than the whiffles I used to get. Well, I'm definitely in good spirits, now. But, what a hectic week it was. I feel like carrying on, now. Ma, those letters, clippings, + especially the package are really swell. I might say, however, that you need not send chocolate bars, as we can get them for 3 cents. Even so, chocolate from you tastes a little better. About yelling at you, I guess you realize that it was only due to my inherent selfish traits. Even so, I always took your advice, after all. Whenever I have a decision I think of what you would want me to do, like this afternoon when I rested instead of going into the rain. So, keep sending advice. (3/6/43)

George's letters are replete with detailed descriptions of the mess food, weather, and daily doings. He is ever complimentary of his mother, and reassures her that he is doing his laundry, bathing, eating well, and observing sound health habits. For all the correspondence and care packages from home, it is noteworthy that George had two brothers serving concurrently in the military, and there was no reason to think that Anastasia (Ma Neilson) was

not equally faithful in writing and sending packages to Bill and Bob as well. Her Franklin stove must have scarcely cooled between batches of cookies as they were parceled out to the three sons. One can only imagine the thoughts and concerns that haunted the mind of a mother whose three sons were headed for harm's way.

The next letter was far more upbeat, describing a delightful Sunday, enjoyment of the surroundings, and a *goodie box* from "Ma."

I heard the Strauss waltzes

Before afternoon mess, I went into the bright, cheerful Philco House for service men. This is on the beach, near the Boardwalk. Here, one can choose and play any number of records like Junior. So, I heard the Strauss waltzes, while I could. (3/8/43)

Hence, the roller coaster of army life has its rushing ups as well as its plunging downs.

Monday, I got my second dose of typhoid "shots;" + these make the boys a bit groggy + some get fevers. However, it did not affect me. But, Tuesday a.m. at 3:00 they hauled our group out of bed + told us that we had K.P. So, today I worked incessantly from 3:30 to 7:00 p.m. It was tough in any man's land. It's wet, sloppy work (washing dishes, floors, tables, etc.) However, I may not get it again. It seemed like a week. Some of the boys keeled over, as a result of Monday's "shots." So, I'm going to turn in, pronto. It was damp today, and we missed no weather, by being on slavery. (3/9/43)

We were exposed at intervals to slight waves of secret deadly gasses

About my cold, it is all better. Everyone has a cold, here. The air is damp although you don't notice it. Symptoms are parched throat + later lots of phlegm there.

In the afternoon, we had an interesting test in chemical warfare about which we previously had been lectured. We went into a tear gas chamber with our masks on. Then, we had to take them off + get a dose of it, so we would understand. It simply makes you choke + cry.

Then, we were exposed at intervals to slight waves of secret deadly gasses which we might come in contact with in this war. This was miserly so that we would recognize the odor (don't ever mention this to anyone). The army is well aware that the enemy will use gas, when they become desperate.

The only thing, as far as I know, that we must do is go to the rifle range for a drill in weapons. After that we simply march + do calisthenics, for God knows how long. Some boys (in previous groups) have been "washed out" for physical defects, + everyone who has finished training simply weeps + worries about if + when they will be shipped. There are so many complications which can hold you up. But, I'm not at that stage, yet.

I hope Junior is in good health. Furthermore I hope you will be able to divert your mind. I realize that it is harder for you than either Bob or anybody in the family, to stand the worry. But, I hope we will be able to do you justice. You get any credit for what any of us might do, you know. (3/10/43)

George's relationship with a hometown newspaper called *The Mercury* is mentioned in the next letter. He wanted his brother Bob's *status* announced. By the timing, this evidently referred to Bob's being evacuated to the states from Guadalcanal Island due to contracting acute malaria. The letter was addressed to Ma, Betty, Junior (Bill) + his wife Mary, whom he had married before the war.

Tell Betty to inform The Mercury of Bob's status. There is no reason why you should not get due recognition. I have the pressure on me of course, again to catch them as I had to in Boy Scouts, high school, College, + outside work. I suppose this is my incentive, because it hangs over me like an ax.

Today, in a way, was a day of drudgery, because we had to do one hour of calisthenics, + drill all morning + afternoon (we marched many miles,

it seems). But, it was all done in a murky, hot day + we had to wear those warm coats, + gloves + gas masks. But, I stripped down, took a shower, changed + felt fine for mess. (3/11/43)

In addition to being swept up with the patriotic response to the attack at Pearl Harbor, George's letters suggest that there was a social element to the enlistment rush as well. Clearly he felt a duty to fall in line with his older brothers, and not be left out of the action.

I hope you will remember that I will imbed in my mind that I must succeed to make you happy. I think this is a better incentive than to think of becoming an officer because the others did, at least I feel suspiciously confident of success, now. But, it looks like a long trail. No telling how long we will be at school. (3/13/43)

George wrote of what he called the "rumor clinic," the constant speculation among the recruits on what is going to happen to them, where they are going, what's next, etc. This is another age-old feature of military life.

I fired a Tommy gun and an Enfield rifle

Well, Saturday afternoon, we marched out to the rifle range which is 5 miles distant. It is located in the sand dunes. It was so hot that we all got more sun burn. However, we had to wear our flight jackets, overcoats + gloves. It was brutal, but I soon forgot it after a hot shower, that evening. I fired a Tommy gun and an Enfield rifle (tell Junior). In the various positions with the rifle, I put 25 of 35 shots on the target. This was the first time of shooting this powerful rifle, which will kill at 3 miles. The kick back did not bother me. The target was 1000 inches (28 yards). I will send it home sometime.

Saturday evening was like a summer moonlit evening at home. It was hot enough to be without most all coats (even blouses if allowable). I went to confession at beautiful St. Nicholas Church here then went to a U.S.O. dance sponsored by them. There were too few girls of course, so I

just watched. Then, I went to Fraelinger's for a big banana split + frappe before turning in.

Now about shipping; that is the nerve-wracking talk 24 hrs. a day, now, here. The rumor clinic has it that a list including us may come tonight. But, then, it may be the end of the week. They keep that stuff pretty quiet.

You see, the sum and substance of the program, here, is exercise and eating. We had 2 solid hours of calisthenics, this morning. Many new exercises which dwelt on stomach muscles + the back. Boy, what pain + agony! But only while exercising. (3/15/43)

George expressed concern and tension about "washing out" of the cadet program, a common fate of Air Corps recruits.

Well, I'm not shipped yet, as you may see. They are shipping the boys in an alphabetical order, which seems like a most unusual procedure. So, I should be on the next roster, whenever it is posted. Many of my buddies either are going or have left and it is rather a funny feeling. A fellow said he saw my name on one of the unposted lists, which means (if true) that I am still qualified and on a shipping roster. Contrary to previous belief many of the boys have been washed out as air cadets, here. Boy, anything can happen here. I won't be sure 'til I'm on the train.

Yesterday, it was cold + when we went over the obstacle course, a fellow missed the rope on which you must swing across a 10 ft. ditch, filled with water. He went headfirst through the ice, cutting his face to ribbons. Others also missed. Today, we did not swing on the rope, as a result. (3/17/43)

Neilson stayed an entire week longer than he expected to at Atlantic City. The rumors about shipment had been more optimistic than real, but by the end of March, George and his group were moved along to the next phase of his preparation to serve in the Air Corps.

The Siege of Atlantic City

On Sunday, March 28, George had another of the many grueling train trips he was to take as he advanced on the game-board of

training to become a pilot. Typically, these trips featured filthy, stuffy rail cars that hobbled along at a snail's pace. His descriptions of the "G.I. Express" are colorful with descriptive hyperbole. On the route to the sleepy town of Grove City, Pennsylvania, he reflected on the unsettling experience he had at Atlantic City.

Well, I'm en route. At this point, there are 100 of us divided into two cars in the train station at Harrisburg, Pa. Nobody knows where we are going, yet, since it does no good to plead with the lieutenant + St. Sgt. with us. By the time I finish this letter, you will know where I am destined to go. We are here for two hours, so I'll start to tell you of the epic siege of Atlantic City.

As you know, everybody shipped out Tue. + Wed., + then they stopped. With the big gap in the ranks, the remainder of us were slugged with details day + night. In the first place, I have not drawn a relaxfull breath since arriving at Atlantic City. Every time someone walked down the corridor at night, I was ready to jump, being naturally on edge. So, this week, I averaged about 4 hours sleep, per night.

I thought I could never get out of bed, let alone K.P.

Thursday, a.m., they woke me for K.P. I was exhausted that night. I got to sleep at 10:30 p.m. They woke me again at 3:00. This time, as the flashlight + the printed sheet met my blurred eyes, I almost died. I thought I could never get out of bed, let alone K.P. So, I hauled myself up to the "C.Q." + pleaded, on the grounds that you can't get K.P. two days in a row. So, I got another 1 ½ hrs. of sleep. But I had another brutal day on the drill field. This turned out to be the last. For that night, an 'alert' list with my name appeared. So, the smoke began to clear.

Thus on Saturday a.m. a big group of us were under command of the shipping + receiving office. We received instructions on turning in our bedding, etc. They marched us 2 miles, in the rain, to a garage for the customary venereal inspection. (They could have taken us across the street to Haddon Hall.) In the afternoon, we were told to be ready to leave at 7:00 a.m. (bags packed, etc.). So, we were all restricted for the night.

The C.Q. came in my room and whispered, "Who's Neilson?"

With all others in the Chalfonte out on passes, the C.Q. decided that since we were restricted we might as well have fire guard + interior watch. Shipping men, by the way, are not supposed to get any details. So, with the place upside down there was no sleep whatsoever. I was on watch from 9 to 11. About 10:30, a new alert list went up; so, as the boys came in, they each took down a section of the place. Then, the "latrine rumors" decided that we might get called at 2:30 a.m. In the meantime, a group of "washouts" came in, drunk, + serenaded all rooms until 1:00 a.m. with a banjo and songs.

Then, "bango!" 2:30 a.m., the C.Q. came in my room and whispered, "Who's Neilson?" Automatically I bloated out, "I had it yesterday." Then, he laughed + said, "Hurry + haul out! On the double, you're shipping early." So, I got up + tore my bed apart + helped the others, too. We had a roll call at 3:30 a.m. Then, they inspected our bags, while we ate at 4 a.m. At 5 a.m. trucks took us to the "garage arena" where we stayed until 7 a.m. They divided us into 7 sections. At 8 a.m. 5 carloads of boys marched to the train (bags over shoulders), happy for the first time in many weeks. It is only a 5 car train, up 'til now. Here, at Harrisburg, the front 3 cars left us for parts unknown. Still more Boston boys in there.

So, here we are, relaxing for the first time, in very nice coaches + spaciously seated. Ma, you cannot imagine the feeling of complete fatigue combined with the pleasant sight of farm houses + woods + hillsides, as we rode through the morning. Everybody slumbered off, in their attempts to gauge the direction of the train.

A nightmare to put it mildly

It was + is like getting out of jail or a work house. A nightmare to put it mildly. I'll only remember the good food. I hope I can forget having to take dirt from ignorant, dirty, ill-expressed, stupid privates, corporals, + sergeants who are given the authority of generals, on that post. However, I was never given extra detail or reprimanded. I guess that I took it all, okay. Many didn't. A lot of boys feared the details, almost to the extent of crying.

I sure am hoping for some sleep + rest. But, it'll take time. At least I have toughened up some, put on weight + am still eating well. 7:00 p.m. We have been riding + snoozing ever since 3:00 p.m. Most relaxing day in the army. Everyone is physically "blotto"; but, not sick. Just weary. We are now high in the Allegheny Mountains. There are two engines pulling us, + I have never seen a train climb so steeply. Certainly is scenic here. We are en route to Pittsburg. From there, we are to go by bus to a little country town, (80 miles) where there is a small college, whose facilities we will use. I'll let you know when we get there (2400 ft. here, big tunnel.)

7:30 p.m., Johnstown, Pa., filthy black, entire city nestled in mountains. It consists solely + completely of a tremendous Bethlehem Steel Co. plant. Most elaborate I ever saw. 9:30, arrived at Pittsburg. Took buses for 54 miles directly out of Pittsburg. We arrived at this place, "Grove City College" at midnight. It is 25 miles from the nearest town, 7 miles from "Slippery Rock," + 34 miles from Youngstown, Ohio, 8 hours by train from New York. (3/28/43)

Probably Neilson's most objective assessment of the Atlantic City experience was rendered in a letter to the secretary of the Boston University Alumni Association. The passage of time allowed George to balance his emotional response with some hindsight.

They treated us like mud and ignorant bums down there

Well, I've been in this army for two months now and it's not too bad. Had I allowed myself to write to you while I was at the Basic Training Center at Atlantic City, I might have told you of how the army was mistreating me and trying to break down my health, etc.

Perhaps you have heard of how the Air Corps men who go to Atlantic City for their first month, get treated. You never get any sleep, although you are supposed to sleep between 9:30 and 5:30. That is just theory. All night long, they come into your rooms with guard rosters and K.P. (17 hours) lists. They file through all the rooms, every night, whether your name is on the list or not. They make you stand by the hour in the cool, damp streets, awaiting formations. I could go on for pages, but, I like to

forget about that. The morning I left for this school, it all seemed like a 4-week -nightmare. They even got us up at 2:30 a.m on Sunday, March 28, to ship us out. They treated us like mud + ignorant bums, down there.

But, here in this quaint little college in the Alleghenies near Ohio, it is all different. They treat us like gentlemen and potential officers. (4/27/43)

Such are the vast contrasts of military life. George learned quickly that in the military, things are not always as they are *supposed* to be. It is true in the army as in life. Though it was not all a bed of roses, the next stage of George's training at Grove City College was a vast improvement on "Camp Boardwalk," as George had named the resort-made-military installation at Atlantic City.

Chapter 5

College Training Detachment

Grove City College
Grove City, Pennsylvania

The Fight to Reclaim Europe Begins: North Africa

In the spring of 1940, Western Europe collapsed before the grim reaper of the German blitzkrieg (lightning war). Following the rapid advance of the German armies and the disaster at Dunkirk, the ground forces of the Western Allies were shut out of continental Europe for over three years. It took that long for Britain and eventually the United States to gain a tenable war footing and attempt a ground assault on Hitler's Fortress Europe.

By the time the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and the United States declared war on Japan and Germany, the British had been fighting Italy and Germany for two years in North Africa. Predominantly a French and Italian colonial region, the conflict began when Italy was fighting for control of British Somaliland in East Africa and the Suez Canal in Egypt. Failing in these efforts, the Italians called upon Germany for assistance. Hitler formed the Afrika Korps under the leadership of panzer (tank) commander Erwin Rommel, whose success won him the nickname "the Desert Fox." In February 1941, the Afrika Korps arrived in Libya and began regaining territory lost by the Italians and pushing the British and Australians back to the Egyptian border by year's end.

For the next two years, the front moved back and forth as the Germans and Italians on one side battled the British and her imperial allies on the other. Most of this fighting occurred near the coastal towns along the Mediterranean. At stake was control of the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean coast with its launching points for a potential Allied invasion of southern Europe. In the

process, Greece fell to the Axis as first Italy and then Germany invaded the ancient country. Yugoslavia fell to the Nazis at the same time.

Continuing to pursue the fight in North Africa, the British under Gen. Bernard Montgomery held off the Germans in two successive battles at El Alamein (Egypt) in May and October 1942, thus pushing the Germans west and away from the Suez Canal into Libya. With the Germans pushing the line in Tunisia in northwest Africa, the Allies, by then including the United States, launched Operation Torch with 65,000 Allied troops on November 8, 1942. With Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower's landings on the Moroccan and Algerian coasts, the first American boots were on the ground in the fight against Hitler. Much US equipment was already in the British arsenal through Lend-Lease. Operation Torch, supported by the Twelfth US Air Force (Northwest Africa Air Force), slowly pressed the Afrika Korps to a final stand in Tunisia.

The German government was determined to hold Tunisia to prevent a sea route from Africa to Europe from becoming available to the Allies. In February 1943, Rommel attacked at the Kasserine Pass in Tunisia's Dorsal Mountains, the weakest point in the Allied lines. The battle was a catastrophe for the unseasoned US troops guarding the pass. Ten thousand Allied soldiers were lost, half of them Americans. But Eisenhower regrouped, unified the Allied forces, and installed master tank commander Gen. George C. Patton to head the US Army II Corps. While Patton ran a diversionary movement, Montgomery's New Zealanders and Free French troops assaulted the contested Mareth Line and pushed the enemy back toward the coast. On May 7, the British marched into the capitol at Tunis, and within a week, the 250,000 German and Italian forces in North Africa surrendered. Africa and the Mediterranean Sea were securely in the Allied camp, on schedule for the Sicily landings in July.[1]

TRAINING STAGE II – COLLEGE TRAINING DETACHMENT, GROVE CITY COLLEGE, GROVE CITY, PENNSYLVANIA

In their efforts to develop a proper flow of recruits into the Air Force Training program, a 2-month program was devised whereby aviation cadet trainees would be assigned to two months of college, prior to going to the classification center for assignment to the real training. Thus, I was assigned with a group to Grove City College, near Butler, PA, a small college endowed by the Pew Family, founders of Sun Oil Co.

This was very pleasant, just like real college, except the curriculum was a "light touch" of a variety of subjects designed to tune-up the minds, probably especially of those who had no college training. We had physical training, which I enjoyed. We ate good and it was an enjoyable dormitory atmosphere. In fact it was my first, and only, experience in dormitory life, since both at Boston University, and later at Harvard Business School, I commuted from home. So, the experience created a little stability in the early military experience. I felt human again, after feeling "tossed around" at Atlantic City. (G.H.N., 1991)[2]

One of the things that the Army reception station accomplishes is to make everything else seem better in contrast. The first thing they do to recruits is throw them into acid to burn off all the civilian impurities so they can make a soldier out of a clean piece of clay.

In an earlier draft of George's memoir as quoted above, he described the "indoctrination" experience at Atlantic City as "unnerving." By contrast, he wrote of Grove City College, "Perhaps the time could best be described as an expanded R.O.T.C. program."

Without question, Grove City was to be a reprieve following a rather bitter baptism into the world of the military machine. George's daily letters home reflect a relatively casual military existence, a hybrid of student life and military discipline at a sleepy, rural college in the mountains of western Pennsylvania. He writes of things ordinary: meals, snacks, weather, the Boston Bruins hockey team, down-time, recreation, study, and thoughts of

home. The war seemed far from his mind. As a college graduate, he found the classes unchallenging, and many of the instructors incompetent. One exception was physics, which he described as "the only part of the curriculum that extended me." He pulled down mostly A's and B's in his marks that were posted weekly, and which he sent home with his letters.

George attended Catholic mass on Sundays, and took walks to pass the time when classes were not in session. There was card-playing and baseball, the latter being the main outdoor recreation activity. George had his mother mail him his ball glove, which gave him an edge in the games. The army men played against the civilian college students. There were movies and also dances, where the Air Corps men were predominantly wall flowers. He wrote of seeing "White Savage" in Technicolor, featuring Dorothy Lamour. It was the ultimate in garrison life, it seemed.

They treated us like gentlemen

Ma, this place, about which none of us have ever heard, is a beautiful, small campus college, high up in the mountains. There is a chapel, etc. There is Gothic architecture in the buildings. They are all like new. This is all from first glance, of course.

The commanding officer was there to greet us, last night. They offered us a snack, helped make us comfortable, called us "sir" + treated us like gentlemen. Lieutenants strolled through our rooms, asking if we were too tired or ill. We got up at 6:30 (not 5 a.m.). We have 1 hr. to get ready. We wear class "A" uniforms most of the time I guess. We are unable to get over this introductory treatment. No rushing here. We are really in the atmosphere of a campus college. Everything will have to be like new – pressed, cleaned, etc. The rooms are new and modern. We were awake 22 hrs. on that last haul. We are no longer dirt, but men of the army. (3/29/43)

Slums to East St., Bums to gentlemen

I hope this is no dream. We ate breakfast at 7:30. The dining hall is marble on the floors + walls, with wood engravings set in. There are finely

finished mahogany tables + leather backed chairs. No K.P. here. They have white coated waiters, who circulate through the hall, replenishing milk pitchers + butter. It is café' style, but of the elite variety. This place is even more elaborate than Princeton, the lap of luxury is no word for it. They have women dieticians.

We are all told that we are "college men" now. They call you "Mister." There are a total of 200 air cadets here, some Marines + some Navy men, all college men. We will take math, history, physics, geography, English. This should be the easiest part of it all. There will also be physical education.

About the name, I never heard of it, doubtless you have not either. It appears that it is a semi-private college for men + women of the wealthy class. I guess I will get a taste of real campus college life! Slums to East St., Bums to gentlemen. That's us. The difference between here + Atlantic City is not measureable.

This morning, we received our orientation lecture. Captain Green (the C.O.) greeted us + told us the story. We are beginning a $35,000 education, the finest of any service in the world. We are to be treated as officer caliber + gentlemen at all times, not as buck privates, as we were before (same pay). We will be here from 3 to 5 months, dependent upon our ability to get the material. Everybody in our group will, if he does not fail out, be an officer in the Air Corps. The non-commissioned fliers will come from other ranks.

100 of us are here from "A" City, joining another 100 of last month. There are also 200 marines + 200 sailors, making up all the military personnel. We are not yet cadets, but still privates. Of course, we never mix with the sailors or marines. They are technical students; we are college students.

You must pass everything or you're out

They told us to put our fatigue clothing in the barrack bags + to forget them. Thus, no fatigue work, all dress. We have only to make our beds + dust the waxed tile floor. Janitors clean the corridors, sinks, toilets, etc. Talk about heaven. Of course the work in class will be hard + you must pass everything or you're out.

From now on, it will be all business + I will have little time to myself, that is for enjoyment. So, I'll probably not write every day; but, I'll tell you all the important news.

This affair is completely competitive, so it promises to be no picnic. But, I'll do my best, for I have everything to gain. I have no fears, like other fellows, of the studies, at least. (3/29/43)

On the double!

This evening, at supper, they began hazing. The 100 fellows who have been here one month are "upper classmen." We address them as "sir." They address us as "Mister." We have to cut square corners on the campus, in the dormitory, + in the mess hall. In the mess hall, you sit on the edge of your chair. Then, if you desire to have anything passed to you, or even if it's right in front of you, you say, "Does anyone want the butter, (etc.)? Please pass the butter." You have to carry yourself in a certain manner + you have to be on the alert to greet everyone you see.

When you fall out of the dormitory, you run out + fall in formation "on the double." Regular formation is a column of 4s. However, academic formation is a column of 2s, to fit the sidewalks here. When we get our clothes back from the cleaners, we will wear jackets, caps, + dress pants to class, dress coat to mess.

The program calls for 34 hrs., approximately of class each week. Add to that the corresponding homework + 1 hr. per day of drill + you may decide how much spare time I will have. But, up here, you feel more than willing to do everything they tell you, because you realize that it's for your own good. (3/30/43)

Let me tell you how free I actually am...

Well, I'm on my own time, right this minute. We have a person[al] + room inspection on Sat. at 1:30. From then, until Sunday night, you can do as you please, so long as you sign out. But, let me tell you how free I actually am. As I told you, we are 1 month behind another 100 cadets, thus we are being hazed (in the fullest sense). So, we have to sit on edge of chairs (stomach to table) at mess, square corners, say "Hello, Mister" to everyone,

etc. In addition, there is only one store that we have access to, in our free time after supper. We are allowed to walk right down there, spend 10 minutes, + walk right back to the dormitory. That's the whole story on freedom. We can't go out even for a walk, for any length of time, else we will be made to feel miserable. But, I really enjoy the discipline + I don't kick at all.

I guess you got the wrong idea, when I mentioned about the girls, here. The only time when we will ever have a chance to even speak to them is on Saturday p.m. + Sunday. They have a dance, here in a hall, every Sat. night. All the regular students are off on a 2 week vacation, as of yesterday. In other words, the only people I will see will be the other Air Corps men + the only place I will go is to classes + the gym. Don't forget, it's 54 miles to Pittsburg + 30 miles to Youngstown, even when we do get passes.

I've had all the courses at least once + they all are aimed to tie up with aviation or officer training. For example, we have 9 hours of physics a week. Then, 3 hrs. of math. English is to help teach you to write reports + be clear + concise; history course is to bring the events from 1870 'til the present to light. This is to give a true picture of the base of this + the last war. Geography is to acquaint us with the maps; terms of astronomy, +all other navigation fundamentals. Drill is not emphasized. The physical training is complete. All kinds of exercises. Right now ½ of the time is spent at the elements of swimming: kicking, holding breath, plunging, etc. I can do 20 push-ups, now. More coming. (4/3/43)

I am sure upset to hear about Ben Harvey. I knew him casually, up at Brookse's + at the lakes. But, I guess the thing will hit closer to home all the time now. Soon, people we know will be on those lists day after day, I guess.

About the table manners, I kind of get a kick out of breaking the bread into quarters, asking to please be excused from the table, etc. I can see why it is asked for, now. Of course only we new men have to do it, but, I think that it might be well to adopt it + try to make it habitual. (4/5/43)

Demerits, tours, and the Bruins

Well, the first demerit list came out, today. My name did not appear, as did almost everyone's. These demerits are not too significant, you

understand, as far as the army record is concerned. It is merely discipline, here. The upshot of them is to walk an hour "tour" for each one over 5, each week, on Sat. or Sunday. They also restrict you, too. Furthermore, you can pick up 5 demerits by merely not falling out on time for an assembly. However, I think it would be good to get as few as possible, of these things. Boy, you really have to sleep at attention, in order to stay on the beam.

I guess the Bruins are about done in the play-offs. I saw the N.Y. paper where they lost the first two, in Detroit. (4/6/43)

If you bat an eye or twitch they take your name

I guess this is the most exacting life that a man can live. Even if you walk out of your room + head for the toilet, you cut square corners. When you fall-in for a formation you must stand perfectly erect. If you bat an eye or twitch, they take your name. If you get your name taken for any one of 500 regulation infractions, 6 times, then you walk a "tour" for one hour, during your free time.

We have to chip in $4.50 for athletic shoes, + the boys don't like it. But, this place is such a new unit that those things are not taken care of yet. Most of us will be broke after buying our supplies, etc. But, we are all in the same boat + we have no place to go, at least for 14 days. At Atlantic City they forced us all to buy a bond a month, in addition to the $6.00 for insurance. All cadets, who did not have family support, were required to do this. That means, I will get only $25, in cash, each month.

I would like to have my watch, if you people deem it practical to send it. At the *beach, the P.X. had none + the Boardwalk is a stick-up if there ever was one. Here, there's no chance of ever getting one; + in this exacting life, it is a pretty good thing to have.

We are supposed to have off from Sat. noon until Sunday nights. After we are off quarantine, we can go anywhere in a 100 mile radius, during the weekend. That, in this neck of the woods, means little more than Pittsburg. But, I'll probably be content to stay here. We only saw Pittsburg at night; but it looks grimy.

They told us to forget everything that happened at Atlantic City, as it wasn't beneficial. They prompted us to act like human beings + not to

continue to live in fear of K.P., as those days are not present, here, at least. They must realize what goes on there.

Oh yes, we eat off of china, again. The boys who go to college here, do the K.P. The dining hall is more luxurious than any Schafft's or Huyler's in Boston. This place is endowed to the tune of $7,000,000 per year. Wealthy boys and girls, only, go here. We will be encouraged to associate, slightly, with the girls, here. We are supposed to assume a refined attitude towards the army, I guess. The officers address you as "gentlemen."

Oh, yes, the program here includes 10 hours of dual flying instruction. That comes a month hence. (4/7/43)

*the *beach* is Atlantic City.

You never know what's next

I really enjoy this life in that it is so strict + exacting. That sounds funny, but, when everything else is so well taken care of, you understand this hazing to be "part of the game." It is uncomfortable at times; but, there are certain times during the day when it is taboo. (After 7 p.m. you are not disturbed, etc.)

An upperclassman was leading us down to the store. We walked in single file, along the right of the walk, as usual, but, we had to run without making the motions (i.e. walk fast). It's quite a thing. You never know what's next. Some boys have hours and hours to walk off. One fellow has 25 demerits. I only got my first two, on Thursday for having one button open. This happened to slip open. Anyway, the 1st 5 are free.

Well, the boys are all looking for the meeting with all the girls tomorrow night, at the dance. They are all high class, I guess, as we have been instructed to act like gentlemen "or else."

You should see the 2 hr. physical program which we encounter every 2nd day. 1 hr. in the swim pool. Then, 1 hr. of brutal calisthenics, which end up with 20 push-ups. You really shiver + shimmy + groan. But, when it's over you feel great. Those are compulsory, too. You can't slack-up on one exercise, or you do 15 push-ups as a penalty. I feel very well, at present.

By the way, this school detach. is controlled by the Southeast Service Command, out of Maxwell Field, Ala.

I sure hope that Bob gets home, after all the talk. He deserves a rest + Ma will get some mental+ relaxation, too. (4/7/43, letter to brother Bill).

Well, now, I suppose you are all aroused over Bob. I hope it is just as you stated it and nothing more. I will write another "V" mail letter to the hospital address. I think that he is probably in the same shape as the rest of them, there. Junior told me that all of the fellows at Guadalcanal were in need of much build-up. Anyway, the fact that he is in a hospital (or more likely was) proves that the job of his group was completed + that they are on safer ground. (4/8/43)

Robert C. Neilson, second elder brother of George, was evacuated from the conquered island with acute malaria in the spring of 1943.[3]

The Battle of Guadalcanal

The Battle of Guadalcanal (August 1942–February 1943) was the first major American offensive following the decisive victory at Midway in July. It was the first ground operation in the Pacific theater. Guadalcanal Island was part of the Solomon Island archipelago in the middle South Pacific northeast of Australia. The Japanese had occupied the Island but were primarily interested in the cattle there. The construction of an airstrip by the Japanese significantly escalated the military threat the island presented. To protect shipping and the defensive build-up around Australia, plans for an American amphibious assault were laid in May 1942.

On August 7, the assault began. Thousands of unseasoned US marines poured from the bulkheads of landing craft and established a beachhead without a shot being fired. The next day, the airstrip was captured when the Japanese retreated into the jungle. Then, fierce enemy resistance arose as the Americans attempted to seize the neighboring islands as support points.

Gradually, the Japanese drive on the main island began. The high command in Tokyo had underestimated the Allied strength on the island. It took six months of fighting in the steaming

jungles of that tropical hell before the Japanese withdrew. The operation was declared complete on February 9, 1943. It was on Guadalcanal that the Allies first learned that this enemy did not readily surrender after being defeated but preferred to die for the emperor whom they regarded as divine. The defeated Japanese commander committed ritual suicide. The torrid climate was as much an enemy to US forces as were the Japanese machine guns. The hot, humid air slowed the men. Malaria was a serious problem in the mosquito-infested jungles, and one-third of the troops on the island were debilitated with this and other tropical diseases. The American victory at Guadalcanal was the first in the so-called island-hopping battles that defined the first three years of the war in the Pacific.

> During the campaign to take Guadalcanal, the Allied losses numbered around 7,100 men, 29 ships, and 615 aircraft. Japanese casualties were approximately 31,000 killed, 1,000 captured, 38 ships, and 683-880 aircraft destroyed. With the victory at Guadalcanal, the strategic initiative passed to the Allies for the remainder of the war.[4]

It was unclear exactly when George's brother came home, having contacted acute chronic malaria on Guadalcanal. It was near the end of May. He was ordered hospitalized for twelve days. George admired his brother and considered him a hero. Bob's army stint was far from done. George[5] wrote:

> Bob's exploits in the South Pacific began when his infantry Regiment went onto the famous battlefield at Guadalcanal, following the Marine invasion there. It was a critical time in the war as the United States was only beginning to get a foothold after long defeats, to begin the trek back to Japan.
>
> During the close fighting at Guadalcanal, Bob was sent to nearby Bougainville Island for training

> in a 90-day Officer Candidate School wherein he [was] awarded a so-called field commission as a second lieutenant.
>
> Then, back at Guadalcanal, he contracted acute, recurrent Malaria which was debilitating. It made for a lengthy period of convalescence and resulted in reassignment to the stateside area. The general outlook was that Bob would be assigned service duties and not be a candidate for combat service again.

The discipline continues on high, now. Tonight, after supper they buttonholed a group of us + made some of the boys sing + recite poetry, while, the others stood in a circle at "parade rest." If anyone laughed or flinched, they put him in a *brace. Finally, somebody grabbed me + made me hold a cigarette between my back + the wall, at attention for 1 ½ minutes. I did it, unemotionally, + they released me. The secret is to not show any emotion. Then, they do not bother you, at least not much.

Studies are beginning to take hold. Only physics will extend me, I think. This is the big subject. Some of the instructors are not too competent, but I don't mind it. I have acquired the habit of studying the teachers' psychological attitude towards the class; so, I never have any trouble understanding teachers. (4/8/43)

*A brace was an exaggerated, almost ridiculous form of standing at attention.

If you have any spare cake

Do not worry about my manners. I am by no means at a loss for feeling at ease, at the strict table, as are many fellows [who] are bucking the thing. In fact, I can see a little light through your persistent instructions in manners which I absorbed; but, which I was too lazy to practice. Any things that you think might help me, along that line, don't hesitate to keep telling me.

Oh by the way, there is, of course, no P.X. + so if there comes a time when I need something; it might be a lot cheaper for you to get + send. I stocked up on soap, polish + toothpaste at Atlantic City. But, you can't get good candy or anything here. So, if you have any spare cake, etc. hanging around, well, you know! There's no hurry, though anytime. Perhaps, the longer between times, the more I will appreciate it. (4/10/43)

We went to the dance, last night. All some of us did was to stand around + watch. Afterwards, we found a place on the main street of town where we could get ice-cream sundaes. So, I had two chocolate ones.

I got the first package on Saturday. Boy! I really enjoy those chocolates. The cookies were a bit broken; but, I ate them all so it matters not, now. I am sharing the chocolates with my roommate. (4/11/43)

The package mentioned on April 11 was the first of many that Mrs. Neilson sent to her son while he was away from home. George always expressed gratitude for these, and shared them freely with his cohorts.

Well, we got paid, today. We received $37. They have not yet taken any money out for bonds. They have removed 2 months premiums of life insurance. Well, I hope the govt. will be paying the premiums, soon as I expected when I enlisted. You say that you think a bond + insurance is too much out of $50! Well, I know it is.

I hope you, Ma, are feeling better. I miss you all the time; + each time I go to church I remember you, Bob + the rest of the family. (4/13/43a)

I am enclosing $5 which is to go towards your Easter hat or something for yourself. I will expect a report on it. (4/13/43b)

Tonight, we all can go out. We need haircuts, etc. We are free to go into the "one street town" for 4 hours. I'll come back a little early + study. We have had several tests + quizzes, this week. The stuff seems so easy. Yet, I am following my old tendency to be careless, in the easy things. As a result, I get A minuses + Bs instead of A "straight." I am sure that when the stuff gets hard enough I will get my best grades. That has been true,

in most cases that I can remember. You see, I have set my own standard of trying to get As now, instead of Bs as I have been satisfied with, before. From this Saturday on, I will give you my weekly grade report. Candy + squares are still holding out. (4/14/43)

George's grades were in the A-B range except for history, which was a D for this week. He explained that a mark less than 80% was a D.

Nasal Spray and Throat Paint

Right now, I am just beginning to get the feel of how to plug at the studies. For example, history is more or less strange to me; so, I'll have to memorize dates, etc. Math is one of the two big ones. To me, this is so simple it isn't funny.

Well, we awoke on Friday a.m. with 6 inches of snow on the ground + blowing a gale. So the whole week was stormy. The result was that everyone got sick. You see, we all have stuffed noses, due to the chlorine irritation from the pool. The result is that everybody has been getting a fever + cold. They call it "nasal pharyngitis." Well, I got a fever of 103o last night. So, I went to the sick room. He wanted to keep me there; but, he had no bed. So, he gave me laxative, sweat pills, aspirin + nasal spray. I went to bed at 7 p.m. When I got up at 6:15 a.m., I was pretty sick. Then, the cascara (liquid) worked. I cleaned out pretty well. Then, I felt better. I reported for sick call and he gave me a nasal spray + *throat point. I suppose it was due, measurably, to overeating and too much sweets + sundaes, etc.

The government is paying our insurance. So, we get $75, less one bond or $56, roughly. In other words, the pay is regular cadet pay. We are called "Air Crew Students" (A.C.S.) not privates. (4/17/43)

*As explained in a subsequent letter, the *throat paint* was iodine.

I am commander of the guard

I am a corporal, being in charge of the main, each day, for our section. Ratings, merely for doing special things like this, entitle you to certain

privileges of officers. So, if I ever get any tours, I can sit them out, in the room. In connection with this, I am commander of the guard, for this Friday night. There are three guard posts here. I will have to check the men, each hour from 7 to 11 p.m. Guard duty, here, is merely a formality, as there is nothing important to guard + no guns to guard with. But, it is for experience.

P.S. As of tonight, they will bring salt + Listerine to our rooms, to gargle with, each night. (4/19/43)

Last night, I went to church, where they had stations + benediction. I was the only one from the army there. It was very good. Happy Easter! (4/22/43)

The best present I could receive

Betty! Thank you for the nice Easter card + thank you, for the picture of Ma. This is the best present that I could receive, at any time. I showed it proudly, to the fellows, who also thought it was nice. I'll keep it with me, with my wallet, at all times. This will serve me just like pictures of girlfriends serve the other fellows. Oh yes, the little yellow chicken is hanging on the curtain pull, right now. That helped make the room look like Easter.

Yesterday, it was real warm around here. After inspection, we all changed into fatigues and played a 9 inning baseball game with the college boys. We all benefitted from the relaxation and the sunshine.

Enclosed, you will find the grades, which probably don't mean much. I probably will not ever get much better, because the studies are not too inviting, in the way of interest. (4/25/43)

We left the yellow chicken in the curtain pull

Well, today was a fine spring day. I never saw so many robins in all my life as have been here. Well, to continue about Easter Sunday, I stayed in, during the evening + listened to the other boy's radio. We heard all the programs: Jack Benny, Fitch Bandwagon, Charlie McCarthy,

Merry-go-round, Fred Allen + the Girl Orchestra. They really had a nice program (Ave Maria, etc.) All in all, it was quite relaxing.

Note to Betty: We left the yellow chicken in the curtain pull, this morning. We just discovered that. I hope we did not get hung on it. If so, it will be the first demerits for any of us in the room.

Today during physical training, we had the usual calisthenics. Then, we had a regular track meet. 100 yard dash, pole vault, broad jump, high jump, weight throw + then, we finished by doing 3 laps around the track, (around the football field).

The hazing being completed, we are feeling just a bit more human. However, we all keep almost as rigid as before. By the way, I am scheduled to be officer of the day, on next Sunday evening. This is only important during the evening + guard duty hours. Well, I can say that I was O.D. for the post, anyhow. (4/26/43).

Demerits! Demerits! Demerits! Demerits!

As far as the studies go, nothing amounts to a row of pins, except the 9 hours of physics which we have each week.

We do not have too much work to do, outside the academic program. But, we must keep the rooms, which we have in a modern, new dormitory, spotless. That entails dusting + bed-making, each a.m. All closets must be arranged in a certain way or else demerits. Demerits! Demerits! Demerits! Demerits! The word rings like a bell in my ear. However, I have been staying on the beam + I have received very few!

You see, I have but one objective. That is to get my wings + commission. In this Air Corps, they hold that over you, continually; so, you must stay on the ball or else they turn you "into the pasture" quick as a flash. After 4 months here, I should go to Nashville, then to flight training unless they make me a navigator. (4/27/43a)

I got 4 demerits last Friday (posted today) for being in the day room when the radio was playing too loud. There were 9 of us in the same boat! Unfortunate, unavoidable, just a situation. But, I hate to get them, on a count like that. (4/27/43b)

George's friends and schoolmates were also getting inducted into the service. He communicated by mail with several.

About the other boys, I have not heard from Joe Hughes, yet; Bernie Freedman was at Miami Beach in the ground crew, at last reports; I heard from Houpis from the Q.M.C. at Camp Lee, Va.; Today, I got a card from Germain. He got his commission in the Marines at Quantico, last week. Irving Marshallman is the only *C.B.A. boy here with me. All the other boys got split up at "the beach." I am sure glad I went through last summer + got my degree. Most of the boys with me, here, did not quite make it. (4/27/43a)
*College of Business Administration (Boston University)

As much fooling and as little studying as possible

The boys are doing as much fooling + as little studying this week, as possible, since Saturday + Sunday won't mean anything, anyway. Today, we had a study period, after dinner. Everybody tried to sleep at the desks. In these study classes, those that do not sleep are busy giving the "hot foot" to the fellows who are asleep.

In these classes, when the teacher does not know too much about the subject, as in math, there is a tendency for some of the fellows to get up + argue back + forth, until the class is in an uproar. In other words, we teach ourselves, except in physics where they must have gotten a "ringer" for the course. (4/29/43)

We just got back from singing. In the auditorium, there is a beautiful organ, which a college girl played while the boys sang all the songs in the army song book, which we have. (4/30/43)

We had inspection (the regular Saturday one) out in front of the barracks. Three officers almost rubbed noses with each of us, to see if we had shaven closely among other things. Many of the boys were not standing with their eyes fixed, as the officers passed by. They got called for it, too. Then, after inspection, we were free – yes, free to stay on the campus. So, we figured we were quarantined. Some of the boys were

getting restless. Thus, the only outlet for energy seemed to be to play cards. So, several groups got together + gathered in various rooms. I suspected that the boys would violate the rules + play for big money; which they did. I found some boys with the same principles as myself. There were six of us. We went to "Homer's," bought some pints of ice-cream, some chocolate milk, and some cookies. We gathered in my room, where we played penny-ante for 3 hours + had a very enjoyable evening. It cost me about 20 cents to play. As I suspected, some of the other fellows, in other rooms, lost most of their pay.

40 of the boys who got here ahead of us are leaving this Saturday. Thus, they are leaving after 2 ½ months. They have completed their 10 hours of flying. (5/2/43)

He told of his plane ride in a DC-4 transport out of Guadalcanal

I give some of all my stuff to Randall Martin, my roommate. He shares his stuff with me, too. He comes from Cambridge; and, he was attending Northeastern. He is a tall, thin, fellow, sitting right across from me now. We get along well; and, we understand each other pretty well. (5/4/43)

I think of you every day; and, if I am privileged to make the grade, it will be all due to what you have taught me. Please buy a hat or something, with this. (5/5/43)

I received your letter with Bob's. It was very interesting. He told of his plane ride in a DC-4 transport out of Guadalcanal. I guess he will be seeing you, within a short while. He must have many experiences to talk about.

I am getting too heavy. I am trying to curb my appetite slowly; but, I am starving all the time. I don't know what to do. I imagine that it is just a spurt which will be over soon. I don't really eat much between meals; but, when mealtime comes, I simply automatically fill up.

The past few nights, what with the let-ups in hazing + less emphasis on "gigs," the boys have been pulling tricks. So, last night, after I wrote the card to you; I went to hop in bed, and it was short-sheeted. So, I had

to tear it all apart + make it again. It was a great joke; everybody is getting it, around the dormitory, now. (5/6/43)

Most fellows have sworn to kill the next bunch

This afternoon, we had a rigid workout. We played softball for the first part of the period. Then, we ran a mile, around the track, went over the obstacle course, and did some leg + stomach exercises. It's getting to be work for a fat man like me. But, right now, I'm starved. I forgot to mention, at the beginning, that my ball glove, magazine + peanuts just arrived. It looks like we will play ball, more + more on weekends, + maybe during the week.

I spoke to the athletic instructor today, and told him I weighed 182, by their scales. He said that was not too much. I told him to look at my stomach; but, he said that was alright.

The group I, of Section A; will leave either tomorrow or the next day; and, it is rumored that 40 more are coming in, next week. I pity those poor fellows, too. Are they going to get hazed? Wow! After our experience, most fellows have sworn to kill the next bunch. (5/7/43)

On May 9, George hitch-hiked a ride to Pittsburg, 55 miles away, joining in a common practice which he found an exciting experience.

This hitch-hiking was a real experience

It was raining Saturday night, as usual, so we went to the theatre + saw "White Savage" with Jon Hall + Maria Montez. It was like the old South Sea pictures with Dorothy Lamour.

Sunday morning was fine, the most beautiful of the spring. The smell of the trees beginning to bud, made it seem a bit cheerful. I went to early mass with some of the boys. Then, on the way down the main street, we met someone who had decided to go to Pittsburg to see the doubleheader game between Pittsburg + St. Louis Cardinals. Before we had time to think about breakfast, we were legging it back to the dormitory. Although the limit of 30 had already signed out of town, 4 more of us decided to

take the chance. So, we got out to the main highway, where my group of 4 decided to hitch it, as it costs $3.40 (round trip) to Pittsburg.

Of course, this was new to me. But, I did not see anything wrong. We waited about two minutes before a kindly, old gentleman picked us up + started us on our way. It seemed nice to be in an automobile again. We sat in back + read the paper as he drove us through the hilly, scenic countryside on one of Penn's beautiful, concrete highways. We crossed the Allegheny River, + got a panorama of Pitt. + all the smoke stacks + blast furnaces. When we got off at 7th Ave., a man asked us where we were headed. We told him Forbes Field + the game. He gave us directions + told us where to go + eat free. (5/9/43)

George continued by explaining that his boys went home with three baseballs that had been hit into the stands. There was a tradition of tossing the captured treasures to the servicemen in attendance. They were treated like celebrities with free seats and snacks. "It reminded me of Fenway Park, in Boston," remarked George. Proud of making it to Pittsburg, seeing a double-header, and returning on the streetcar for just pennies, George reflected on his distaste for urban living.

I received another letter from Bob today; and, I answered it, just now. He sure has some very interesting things to say. He really has seen the world, and he has met some officers + men of the Air Corps, Navy + Marines. I guess there never was anything more exciting than the doings over at Guadalcanal. (5/10/43)

By contrast to this excitement, much of the content of George's letters home relates to the weather, meals, uniforms, his studies, physical training, Sunday walks, and daily routines. At Grove City College, life went on in a world far removed from the war. Yet letters from his family members, in and out of the conflict, served as a reminder to George of what lay ahead.

There is a camp about 50 miles from here where the army sends its misfits. It is in Ohio, Camp Shenago. I guess those boys are pretty "colorful." Some of the fellows have run across them in their travels.

One of the fellows who went to school with me is training to be an aerial gunner, in Texas. He will get a pair of wings + a sergeant's rating. (Merlino is his name. He rode with me to the prom, last year.) Another Jewish boy is near Denver, Col., in the armament dept. of the Air Corps. He also went to school with me. (5/10/43)

Even in May the weather in Grove City was hot and sultry with frequent rain and overcast. One professor asked the cadets how they would describe the weather there, and the terms "equatorial rainforest" and "Chinese monsoon" were among the responses (5/18/43). The dreadful weather created a logistical problem for George and the other men, as they had only been issued two summer uniforms (referred to by George as *suntans)* and they could only send laundry once a week.

I had a letter from Junior yesterday; I guess this new job will give him somewhat of a rest, for a while anyway.

I have two new teachers; one in English + the other in math. You might be interested to know that some of the math ties in with navigation problems, etc. It is simple for me; but, some of the boys are having their troubles. (5/11/43)

We have to study too long on history + geography, in comparison with what we should do on physics. There are many minor points which must be ironed out, as far as this program of studies is concerned. There should be an outline of all these courses so that the teachers would know what + how much to emphasize. As it is, we have too much in the texts, for us to take in this program, but, the teachers do not know what the army wants emphasized. The army does not know, either. They simply instituted the program + left it up to the colleges to put it on a smooth working basis. The thing becomes smoother + smoother as we work along, though.

I am commander of the guard tonight, so I must check the posts once or twice, this evening. (5/11/43)

George described in his next letter what is called a "brace," a mutation of the attention position used expressly for hazing. He

was being photographed in these contortions for the benefit of a fellow cadet's visiting girlfriend.

I took the girl to the drugstore where we each had a soda

First, you stand at attention and "suck in your gut" + hold your breath. Then, you pull your shoulders back until it almost kills you. The fellow in the pictures is holding his finger on my spine, as they usually do. You are supposed to try + reach for the ground, while trying to pinch the finger with your shoulder blades. All the time, you hold your breath + hold your chin on your chest, wrinkling it as many times as you are "years of age." So, there it is. The fellow in Section A, brought it to me, last night.

I went to the U.S.O. and danced a couple of times with an editor of the college newspaper. She is a native Grove City girl. I guess she has never been out of Penn., either. It is very warm, tonight. I took the girl to the drugstore where we each had a soda. I forgot the time. So, I had to run, at quarter to 10. I may see her again, I don't know. That is how the evening passed. I can see where, the novelty of this town no longer exists. So, there will not be much inducement to go out on open post. (5/12/43)

Not only was George an excellent student, his record as an athlete was evident in his increasing prowess on the track.

This morning we had a real workout, on the track, outside. We ran 100 yard dashes, after exercises. Then, we jogged about 2 ½ miles, around the track. (5/14/43a)

We had another strenuous drill, today, in gym. We did calisthenics, rope climbing (at which I am no good), 1 mile run again, swimming, + practice in the Air Corps physical fitness test. Tell Betty that I did 75 sit-ups from the prone position, touching the alternate knees, on each trip up. I am sure that I will be able to do over 100, when the test comes. No one else, at least in my bunch, can touch that mark. My back + legs are pretty strong, I guess. I am weak in chin-ups though. (5/14/43b)

This morning in gym we all ran the mile distance. I finished second, while there was 35 boys behind me. I was surprised at my ability to do so well. (5/19/43).

As far as when the war will be over, I am not up on the news. I only see the Sunday papers. However, I still say it will be a long war. I said that the Tunisia campaign would go 'til September. Betty, you said March. Well, it went into May. The war in Europe is good 'til the fall of 1944. And as Bob says, the war with the Japs will be over about 1948. I believe it, too. (5/14/43a)

Back in western Pennsylvania, the war had a distinctly different ring, as George describes in his next letters the hazing of new student-soldiers, joviality among the fellows, spring flowers, and the entertainment scene. Humor is one of a serviceman's most important tools in the battle for the mind. Apparently there was no lack of it at the time.

They shiver when they see us

We really handed it to the new boys for a while, today. Gee, they don't know what the score is, at all! We had them eating their meals by the number, that is: They would pick their food up on the fork, at the count of 1. At the count "2" they would pick it up. Then, "3," put it in the mouth. They are so scared they shiver when they see us. They don't know whether they are coming or going. We have created a fantastic picture of what goes on here; so, they are completely befuddled. It's a shame, too. They are such nice looking boys from deep down in Tennessee. (5/14/43a)

I am beginning this as Jack Benny's program is coming in over the radio. All the boys are sitting in my room listening to it.

Last night I went up to the U.S.O., where there was dancing, Ping-Pong, +singing. The U.S.O. is a nice place. There are pleasant rooms with tables, chairs, etc. for writing. The dance hall is very big—like Pitman's. I played Ping-Pong most of the time.

We had to be in by 1:00 (those that signed out just for Grove City). Those who signed out for out of town are not supposed to come in. However, many of the fellows do that so that they can come in at any hour of the night + still be technically okay. As a result, nobody felt like sleeping. We spent all night throwing things like shoes + bottle caps (Coca-Cola caps) at each other. Some of the fellows found their beds filled with salt. That added to the confusion. About 3 a.m., the water started to fly around. They came into my room (and then I went into the others) with a glass of water. When they figured that you were dozing off, you got it in the face. So, I slept about 4 hours on Saturday night. (5/16/43)

George attended Mass the next morning after the carrying-on the night before. The rest of the day he spent reading the paper, napping, hazing "Jeeps," and a little studying. He wrote that nine of the forty who went to Tennessee (the next step after the college gig) washed out of flying, remarking that that was a high percentage. He wrote to B.U. colleague Joe Hughes at Bowdoin College in Maine. Joe was to be a life-long friend of George's.

Each day, this program assumes the proportions of only providing a good physical build-up and some physics. The rest seems pointless. As Junior says, though, it should keep the percentage of washouts down. (5/17/43)

The army is a huge mixing bowl, where people of all walks of life, all regions and cultures come together as (more or less) equals.

Ma, you should see these southerners. They are as funny as they make them. They came from the Deep South + they hate us. We go around + say "So, you hate us, well you've got a whole month to do it; so, get a good start, etc." You should hear them say, "I'm on the ball, ball, and ball. I'm on the ball, ball, ball. I'm on the ball." They say that each time they are asked to sound off. They also repeat their name, address, serial number, etc., as fast as a tobacco auctioneer would chant. They also have to respond

to what they are famous for, when asked. These things are not so pleasant. (5/17/43)

I am at sea for the want of suitable entertainment

All the boys from the neighboring rooms are gathered about my desk listening to Manhattan Merry go Round. Oh! Oh! Blackout! 10 p.m. Well that thing is over. They have one every two weeks. Now we are listening to the girl orchestra.

At 8 o'clock I went to the theatre. I saw "Power Girl," a musical with Benny Goodman. It is the story of a girl with a lifetime ambition to be one of the models who works for John Power's agency in New York. Dennis Day was in it. It was fairly good.

Then, I dropped in to the U.S.O. to the formal dance which they were having. So, I killed the evening. I am at sea for the want of suitable entertainment here. It's either the show or the U.S.O. Neither one attracts me one bit.

P.S. We have a singer, a clarinetist, and an auctioneer among our "jeeps." They have been given a chance to show off, in hazing. The boy who chants is as good as "Speed Riggs" on the Lucky Strike Program. (5/23/43)

Tonight we inaugurated a softball program, whereby there will be 4 teams playing in two games, 4 nights a week. These are two teams from each section. The games will be played between 6 + 7:30 p.m. The field was so drenched by the torrential + constant rainfall that we could not play too well. Our team won 14-10, in 6 innings. We were black from head to foot, as a result of sliding in the mud. We all went to the lockers in the gym to dress in our shorts, etc., to play, though. (5/18/43)

Guard duty, that universally disliked ritual of army life, was part of the routine among the air corps men. It consisted of walking around in a twosome at all hours of the night, checking padlocked doors, and looking militarily.

The guard roster got mixed-up. One fellow who was on the early shift thought he was on late. He went to the dance, at the U.S.O. The *O.D. had to go down and drag him back, for which he will be "gigged." Another fellow, at the store post, got caught eating ice cream while on duty. (5/19/43)
*Officer of the day

Ma, I send you my grades each week, but, whether the marks get good or bad, don't think that they reflect my true ability in the subjects. The program is so erratic, + unsystematic in grading, testing, etc., that you automatically become a cog in the weekly turn of events. But, the grades we get are not so important as military bearing, + discipline, effort etc. Everybody is resigned to that. (5/19/43)

I did 115 sit-ups

I guess this is more what you'd care to see. I told you about having them taken that Sunday you complained about that other foolish picture I sent. This is the best one of the lot too. My big belly shows up in the others.

Today, we took the Air Corps Physical Fitness Test, which we must repeat every six weeks from here in. I guess my back and legs pulled me through. I did 115 sit-ups. The scale in this event only runs up that far. So, I got 100% in this event. If necessary I think I could do 150 or 200. No one else could figure how I did it. The chin-ups is my weak event. I could only do 6. The instructor said it was natural due to the excess weight I have to lift. I ran the 300 yards in 50 seconds, which was better than average. So, my total score figured out to 66 on a percentage basis. This is termed "very good" on the scale. (5/24/43)

So they had me on physics

Tonight, they had a new wrinkle on studying for those who failed a subject the previous week. They selected tutors for each of the subjects, one for each subject, one night of the week. So they had me on physics. What a laugh! If it had been math, I would have thought better. But in

physics, I am no better than anyone else. So, I had one fellow; and we went over the next assignment together.

Several boys, who have been going out weekends when they had "closed post" were caught, when they had a roll-call, last Saturday night. They were put on the carpet for being A.W.O.L. They might have been thrown out, court martialed, or sent back to "A" City for reclassification. After scaring them, the *C.O. decided to give them one week's fatigue detail of some kind. The southern boy who went over the hill – really – is still missing, as far as I know. (5/2543)

*Commanding officer

Tonight the 40 boys from the southland got their first open-post, since being in the army. Their hair was over their necks + down their backs. You should have seen the rush down the hill, at 6 o'clock. We all needed haircuts; + we didn't intend that the jeeps would get ahead of us. So all along, we were trying to mislead them as to whereabouts of the barbershops. Anyway we walked into the chairs in front of them. (5/26/43)

I almost fell over when I got your note, this afternoon, Ma. You should feel pretty good right now. I can imagine it must be pretty strange to see Bob home after all these months. I'd sure like to be there for the occasion.

On the other hand, I don't care too much about coming home until I make something of myself. All I want is to see you folks. (5/28/43)

Saturday, it rained of course. So, I rested all afternoon. After supper, I went to see "Pride of the Yankees," which I should have seen years ago. It is a wonderful picture. (You know, the story of Lou Gehrig.)

Our minds need a change from the dryness of the procedure, each weekend. We may have to drill, on Monday. That is, march to the town cemetery. (5/30/43)

After being confined to a small area surrounded by the rather dull world of the military, the outside world appears more beautiful than it ever had before. One comes to appreciate ordinary things that had always been taken for granted.

We had a rugged physical drill

The day, today, was terrifically muggy, rainy, + hot. I had no feeling that it was Memorial Day, either. Things went on, as usual. We had a rugged physical drill, with track events as the feature.

We expect to get paid, tomorrow. Tomorrow night we are going, as a unit, down town to see a movie called "Next of Kin, a war propaganda picture. At least it will be an innovation + relief wasting time up here in the barracks, most of the evening. It will also relieve me of my physics "tutoring" assignment. (5/3143)

George was very interested in the graduation at his alma mater in Boston. He was not able to attend the event, but mentioned it and the yearbook, *The Bond,* several times in his letters. It was noteworthy that so many of his classmates had joined the armed forces. Missing such gatherings of friends is painful for a young soldier, reminding him that his freedoms have been curtailed.

Today I got a long letter from Joe Hughes, who is at Bowdoin. He is studying meteorology; but his program is similar to ours. That is my first letter from him. He got home to see the other boys graduate.

I also heard from Owen Carle, who played hockey with me. He graduated, and then he is heading for the Marines. He said that the boys in the Navy V-7 who were finishing school were on hand for the graduation. They were all friends of mine. I guess everyone who graduated in January was on hand, except me. (5/31/43)

The next eight letters were joined with a rusty paperclip during seven decades of storage. Across the top of each, in a cursive script that was not George's was written the words "Grove City Flying."

Neilson's first experience flying an airplane was on Wednesday, June 2. It was only the second time in his life he had ever *ridden* in an airplane. This experience he described in great detail. From then on, his letters were dominated by intricate details of flight training. The flight set George's heart on fire with thrill.

Like box kites in a tornado

Well, I flew an airplane, today. We went to the airport, this afternoon. Three of us were assigned to each instructor. So, we each flew for ¾ hours, one after another. (Of course, you understand there is only one, besides the instructor, in the plane at one time.) I flew second, about 3 o'clock.

Here's how it happened! The instructor told me to hop in + sit on the "seat pack" type parachute, in the rear seat. Whereupon I strapped it on as instructed. He was careful to tell me not to pull the cord, which would open the chute + the instructor would have to pay $3.00, for repacking. By the way, you could never miss this cord. It has a metal handle on it as big as an ash barrel handle. (I often had wondered about that). Then, the line boy came along + we went through the ritual of "switch-off," "switch-on," "contact," etc. and we started zig-zagging up the field to the runway. (They call it a runway but it is just where the slopes level off sufficiently to permit take offs + landings.) You zig-zag in order to see all oncoming landing or taxiing planes, which you cannot see, over the nose, which plane is on the ground. All the while he was telling me all just what he was going to do with the throttle, the pedals + the stick. Finally he headed down the field, opened the throttle, + we were off. The instructor flew the plane for about 3 minutes. He took the plane up to 400 ft., made a 90 degree turn, went up to 600 ft., made a 45 degree turn + headed for the practice area, which I was assigned to fly to.

Do what you want with it, it's all yours

He said, then, as he picked up the logbook of the plane, "Do what you want with it, it's all yours." I was so excited that I asked him, "What did you say?" He said, "You'd better keep that right hand on the stick, you're flying the plane.

Well, Ma, I was so excited that I was a bit too tense as I tried to call to mind everything that I was supposed to do. However, after kicking the pedals back + forth, = bringing the nose up + down to the horizon, + moving the stick around, trying to make the wings level, I had the thing flying smooth in a few tense moments.

Most of the time, I was a bit tense about making mistakes in flying. Being up in the air didn't bother me in the least as it bothered the other fellows. (I'll tell you later.) I knew I had to relax; but, I guess that will be next time.

The plane is awfully, awfully sensitive. You push anything a hair + it reacts immediately. So, with these muscles anxious to work, it was a bit jerky for a while. It is very similar to riding in a sailboat for the first time. You simply must get the feel.

After I got the thing on equilibrium, I was told to try to follow a road, which led to Mercer. First, let me tell you that it was very windy + rough; which, even the pilot said was unusual. And, these cubs do not fly like airliners. Oh! No! They are like box kites in a tornado or a cork in a ground swell on the ocean. I simply couldn't keep the thing level. Then in following the road, I had to "crab" (i.e. head crossways to the road in order to counteract the wind from the left). Well of course, the wind took me over to the left + the instructor would say, "Now, get back there + keep it following the road." After a while, I would try to sneak over to the left, into the wind, when I thought he wouldn't notice that I was slipping. But, my maneuvers were oh so ungracious!

Now what's happening?

It is a bit of a knack to turning, which I did not quite catch on to in the flight. To make a turn to the left you must press a little on the left pedal, + at the same time give the stick a little left push. When this happens, the left wing drops (but quickly, the way I did it!) + the ground appears directly below you through the glass window (which is on the side of the plane.) "Wow!" I said, "Now what's happening?" I was sure I could not see what would keep the plane from slipping sideways to the earth. How will I ever get this straightened out? All the while I was "climbing to the high side," which is unnecessary (as in a boat) in an airplane to level it off, you must kick the opposite pedal + bring the stick the other way. Then it is a problem of balancing the wings like a pair of scales. I had a bit of trouble getting it through me that to make a turn, you push the pedal + then leave it go. You only put the feet on the pedals to make a maneuver. Then, you

take them off. Each time the plane would head down + steep in a turn as I kept my foot on the pedals.

As you fly, you keep the right hand on the stick + the left on the throttle. Sometimes when I pulled the stick back to get altitude, I pulled the throttle back + lost speed. But, the instructor (in front of me) would be quick to push it back.

So, I bobbed around for ¾ hour between Mercer + Grove City (10 miles). I circled the airport about 3 times; but I swear I could never see it. When the instructor said, "Head back for the port," I said, "Where's that?" I'll be darned if I could find it although it sticks right out, amidst the spacious farms in the area.

I was a bit disappointed in my abilities

Strangely, or not, not much went through my mind except the mechanics of flying. I was a bit disappointed in my ability to coordinate my hands + feet, in order to make the operations smooth. However, I did not do bad, compared with other fellows. I took the plane to 600 ft, by cutting the engine + then followed through the directions of the instructor to the 400 ft. point, where he made a 90 degree gliding turn + slipped on to the field, + splashed directly into a mud puddle, which was inevitable + which all planes were hitting. So, we taxied around to the "line" + I had completed my first flight. I sure hope that these hours here will not be a false beginning to flying, which may or may not come later. Thus, I signed out of the parachute + plane.

I was completely unemotional, the whole time I was not nervous; but I was a little tense. It was just like a sailboat ride, only rougher this time.

7 threw up in the plane

The other fellows – oh! Yes. Out of 15, 7 "threw up" in the plane + most of them were pale + oozy. But, there is no razzing them in this business. It can happen to anyone, any time, just like sea sickness. One fellow came down after ½ hour. He had been sick. He went up after 1 hour + he got real sick. He now hates it + does not hope to fly. (That's for

now at least.) Several others just made it, without sickness. Few ate any supper, this hot, humid evening either.

I had gluttonously forgotten about flying + ate my usual 3 helping dinner, while the others rationed their dinner. I ate a good supper, too. But, mind you, I am not bragging; because I can imagine the folly of that. I am just telling you how it happened. I used so much energy that I ate 5 ice creams right after I came down

Some of my group don't know whether they will like it or not, yet. But, I am reasonably certain that I will. However, wait for further reports. (6/2/43)

I was in heaven this morning

Well, here's the important thing. I took off at 10:15, this morning. (Ahem!) I thought that the instructor had taken over the controls, as we started down the runway. I had taxied the plane into position. As we got most down the way, he said, "Pull the stick back + she be up." So it did! Was I surprised! I brought it up to 400 ft., made the 90 degree turn to get out of the airport traffic, then climbed to 600 ft. + I started for the practice area.

Well, folks, believe it or not, I was in heaven this morning. I was perfectly composed, nothing bothered me, and I am sure that I had the best time of my life. I was my own boss practically. Everything that the instructor (Mr. Hittle) had told me before, I was able to apply + understand. He did not touch the controls except to demonstrate how to avoid skidding, on the turns. When we arrived at the practice area I was able to pick out all the landmarks that identify the area. So, I was over a straight road practicing "S" banks + turns, with the greatest pleasure that you could imagine.

Oh! Was it fun. Then, the instructor pointed out a coal mine + I circled around about like this [illustration included]+ we watched the steam shovels, etc., as they worked 2000 ft. below. Then, I was watching autos + cows.

I had the idea of a coordinating the stick + the rudder well in hand, before the time had expired too much. I was not in the least excited or

anything. It was the most wonderful thing that I could imagine, tipping one wing down, circling around, then leveling it off again.

Thus, in my second attempt, I had taken off, flew uninterrupted and landed

When we came back, I learned how to cut the gun, make a glide + two gliding turns from 2000 ft. to 400 ft., + then, into the field. It was the most wonderful thing that you could imagine, this maneuver. It seemed like we were already on the ground as I made a sharp bank to head for the runway. As we soared down I thought Hittle was going to take over. But, he kept saying, "Keep pulling the stick back as we go down." I did, but I didn't understand how far he meant. I didn't think that he was going to let me land the plane. So, I was surprised to hear the wheels hit. But, I had not pulled the stick far enough, so we bounced. Then, he forced the stick back so that mine was almost in my guts + she settled down. Then, it was clear what he meant. I had the feeling then. I'm sure I can do it again, more easily.

Thus, in my second attempt, I had taken off, flew uninterrupted + landed, almost without help. All I have been able to do all day is think of it. I got more of a thrill out of it than any of the others in my group. Two or three of them got pretty sick, + felt like giving it all up. Right now, I feel like flying, almost.

Tomorrow afternoon, I will start *stalls (roller coaster stuff). You see my particular instructor is quiet + easy going. He is letting me find my own way, I guess. Other instructors make the maneuvers + then make the boys do it after them. He doesn't do it to me. He tells me what to do + lets me find out how to do it. (6/4/43)

*A stall is when the plane slows to the point of going into a dive.

After the flight training (which was part of a ten-hour program), George was a bit annoyed to have to deal again with classes, studying, and the pettiness of his campus assignment.

Of course, the mark that I have an opportunity of earning in flying is far more significant than these other silly courses. However, we are

expected to keep up on the assignments + be ready for quizzes, etc. when we are there. You see the ultimate grade in flying will be attached to my record, when I go to Nashville + it may be significant in classification. So, here's hoping.

Today was so hot that you could wring out your clothes, every 10 minutes. It must have been 110 degrees. Boy! Oh Boy! I rinsed out my underwear, etc. after the ball game, this evening. I also drank 2 gallons of water today. (6/4/43)

Thus I was at class, ran a mile, played ball, went swimming, went flying, went to the dance, and played Ping-Pong all in one day. (6/6/43)

I thought sure I was going through the hangar

About the flying, I was a bit too tense, perhaps due to the strenuous physical exercise of the morning. So, I could not do as well as I had hoped. I thought sure I was going through the hangar on the takeoff. But, I finally made it, with a little help. No sooner had we got to 400 ft. when we saw the gas cap loose. So, we landed + put it on. That did not help matters too much. However, when we finally got straightened away, I did okay. I practiced turns for a while.

Then I started to do climbing turns. You keep the nose up, at the same time keeping one wing tilted a little. Thus, you gain altitude in corkscrew fashion. After a while, the instructor asked me if I wanted to see what happened when the climbing turns are made too steep. I said, "Sure." He said, "Hang on." Up she went, slowly she started to lose speed. Then, the bottom fell out + we were off in a spin. I was amazed. Of course, I did not know what was going on. The first turn was like the first drop in a roller coaster. After that you look straight down + watch the landscape go around in circles. The first spin really thrilled me + made me breathless. He said that we did 4 complete turns in the first spin, which is considerable. It took about 15 seconds + we lost 1000 ft. of altitude. I can safely say it was the biggest thrill I have ever had. I found out today that they are trying to give us 35 hours of experience in 10 hours, to see how we react. So, we will not have time to absorb everything we learn, I guess. (6/6/43)

The rest of the weekend was spent languishing at the ice cream bar, napping, playing Ping-Pong, listening to the radio, and more ice cream. George's humor was again revealed in an inner struggle he experienced over an increasingly urgent need to lose weight.

Ma, I must lose weight, definitely. I weighed 191 on the scales downtown, this a.m. I will start soon to lay off something, maybe ice-cream (I don't think) or something more practical like spinach or something. Briefly, I don't know what to do. I'm not worried, but there is a weight limit, for my size, which I'll find out soon. Maybe you could plan a diet for a hungry boy that does not include all I eat. There's a problem for you. Maybe the anxiety of flying will help to curb my appetite. (6/6/43)

If the motor ever quit

I didn't know this flying business was going to affect you. Don't be too disturbed. After all, it is only 10 hours. To be sure, they want quite a bit done in that time; but, it is only a prelude, I hope to what I might get into, after I get through Nashville.

The only thing that annoys me is my inability to catch on as quick as I think I should, to new maneuvers. However the instructor has not been swearing at me, as have others. As far as being up there, I have not too much fear of what is happening. I guess the purpose of the entire program is to see if you can stand the gaff in the plane.

You can rest assured that every safety measure is taken to insure our protection. If the motor ever quit on those planes, you could almost glide to a safe landing without worrying. The instructor took his safety belt off, when we went into a spin the other day, to show me how + why there is no need for anxiety when you do that maneuver. (6/7/43)

College classes began to take a back seat to the flying instruction. The cadet continued to relay every detail of the maneuvers, reflecting on his performance. He was getting a lot of different experiences, flying with different instructors in different planes and working new maneuvers on a daily basis.

He was a quick study to the point where in the first five hours of instruction, his mind already began to wander a bit, so routine had it become. Flying provided the mental challenge that was lacking in his coursework. He had great confidence in his abilities, which owing to his superior intellect was not unjustified.

Despite flying instruction, the cadets were expected to maintain their weekly grades. George's attitude was that grades were important but not crucial. He ascribed variations in the grades to instructional incompetence as well as an inconsistent schedule. Nonetheless, his average was in the B range. As the flying program progressed, he focused more on his achievements in the cockpit than in the classroom. He put a lot of pressure on himself to succeed on each flight, determined as he was to land a berth in the air corps pilot ranks.

Following Grove City, he would proceed to the air corps classification center at Nashville where the men would be ferreted out for training in the various positions on an aircraft, primarily pilot, navigator, and gunner. Keenly aware of the looming sort-out, he pushed himself toward excellence.

Chandelles and stalls with a couple of spins thrown in

Well, today I found out that there is more to flying than what I think. I suppose that was what I was supposed to find out. I didn't feel as if I did so well, today. I made a mistake, coming into the traffic pattern, on the way in for a landing. I made a continuous bank, instead of two 90 degree turns. Then, I overshot the field + we had to climb up + circle in, again. I don't think the instructor was too pleased. But, they are asking us to learn a lot, especially when it does no good to memorize it + it requires practice. You must cut the throttle to a certain speed when you get altitude, look all around to "clear yourself" before making a turn, + all sorts of details.

The instructor sought to loosen me up by giving me a series of side loops – called "chandelles" + stalls with a couple of spins, thrown in. Well, it gave me more confidence in the plane, once I found the horizon again. But, I'm still a little tight. I'm not afraid of the twists + turns or

the altitude. But, I'm still afraid of what the plane might do, in my hands, which I shouldn't be.

When we are awaiting our turn to fly, whenever the sun is out, we take our shirts off + lay in the grass, right out-side of the hangar. In history, we are studying Germany + England, before this war. (6/8/43)

This is only a tasteful

I received your letter Ma, yours Betty + Bob's. They all appeared that you have some concern over me flying a plane. Well as I said before, this is only a tasteful. I sure hope that I will get a whole swallow later on. To be sure, it is a complete taste, though.

I was up at the U.S.O. playing Ping-Pong tonight. A couple of the boys who have the same instructor as me said that Hittle was in a fight or an argument with the airport manager about a tangle when both were approaching for a landing. Supposedly, the instructor (Hittle) was in the right. At any rate, he lost his job for violating the flying rules. So I expect to get a new instructor when I go out tomorrow. (6/9/43)

Anastasia Neilson obliged her son's request for a diet plan to help him lose weight. Strange by today's way of thinking, George took it seriously.

Ma, that letter is just what I need; it seems like old times to have you writing that stuff. Now, Ma, I am going to start right in on that as best I can. I'll keep that letter with me or where I remember to look at it, for a while. I started, at supper time, by not going back for seconds. I intend to keep that up, too. I'll begin tomorrow with the lemons before breakfast. (4/10/43a)

The Noble Celebrity

I received your letter, this afternoon, along with one from John Black. He says that Frank Newton (Betty or Junior should know him) is navigator on the *fortress Clark Gable has been flying in over Germany. (4/10/43b)

*"Fortress" or "Flying Fortress" is a nickname for the B-17 bomber.

Screen legend Clark Gable had been recruited by Gen. Hap Arnold to help produce a short training film on aerial gunnery called *Combat America*. However, the king of Hollywood, as he was known, enlisted to be a gunner on his own after his wife, Carole Lombard, was killed in a plane crash in January 1942. Arnold refused to give him a regular combat assignment, as much as Gable wanted to be in the thick of it. He tried to shed all of his notoriety and be a regular airman, but achieving anonymity was a losing battle. The star was paid $320 a month, less than 1 percent of what he made filming *Gone with the Wind*, the greatest box-office success of all time. He flew with the 351st Bomb Group out of Polebrook, England, on some of the toughest missions of the war and was almost killed on his first sortie. Luftwaffe chief Hermann Goering had a $5,000 bounty on Gable. Despite his bravado and an occasional tiff with air force rules, Gable served well and gained the respect of the men, once they realized that he wanted to be treated like all the others.[6]

As I laid out on the lawn, under the trees, between classes, I thought (or imagined) how nearly it was to heaven being in such a quiet spot (that is, as far as the army is concerned). Oh, yes! We will never be in such a place, as long as we are in the army, especially with distasteful Nashville as the next hop. (6/10/43b)

We also went through a series of stalls at 2200 ft.

Today was a lovely day. It was warm + clear. It was fine for the 5th airplane ride. I had the new instructor about which I had told you. His name is Stage. He is in marked contrast with the other fellow. He is very attentive to every move which I make. Every time the wing would get off-level, he would motion for me to pick it up. He is more of a rule stickler than the other man; so, things must be done a little more precise for him. He had me practicing 90 degree, 180 degree, + 360 degree turns. Then, I did some gliding turns.

There is a strip coal mine in our practice area about which we do the turns. Unless I use the mine or a crossroads for a bearing, it is pretty hard to judge the correct angle of turn. We also went through a series of stalls (partial, normal, + complete) at 2200 ft. altitude. These are in effect like a roller coaster except that these stalls don't give the sensation of "bottoms up" on the stomach. You simply cut the speed + raise the nose of the plane 'til it stops flying + starts for the ground, nose first, then you pick it up with the stick + resume flying. There was hardly any wind; but, the air was exceedingly bumpy so it made maneuvers hard to accomplish. When I landed, I was satisfied that I had made progress, although I have no idea of what progress I should have made. I did feel relaxed up there, wander at intervals, like I might do on the ground. I think I'll get on good, as we go along. (6/11/43)

George's frustrations over the irregularity of pay day was a mounting frustration at Grove City, particularly since many of his day-to-day expenses drained his meager means. Complaining about pay is a classic part of military life.

It's borrow! borrow! borrow!

Oh yes! Our section has not been paid + it may not be for another week either. It started to be pathetic but, now it's a shame. It's borrow! borrow! borrow!, right now. Some of us (40) are living on shoe strings, you might say. I suppose when we finally get paid, it will seem to be as broad as it is long. But, right now, it more than illustrates how we in this phase of training, are being "paid in the dark." One thing is certain. The gov't must pay us $75. for this month of flying. But, we will not get that for some time, it seems. Right now, it's pretty uncomfortable with a nice weekend coming + no money with which to go to Pitt. or someplace.

Ma, when I get paid, I'll send home a couple of dollars for flowers for Pa's grave, for Father's Day. I thought of it but, as you can see, I am powerless, now.

Well, I hope Bob makes the most of his time. He'll sure be proud when he tells all the stories to his friends around [town]. That's what goes with going through hell for a while, I guess. We went through what we thought

was hell at Atlantic City + look where I am, at least for now. It's a poor analogy, but, you can see what I mean.

From what I can gather, it is no picnic at Nashville. (6/11/43)

The best of Grove City

Well, this confused + straining week ended in the most pleasant way when I talked to you folks, over the phone. I did not know what to say when I heard Bob's voice. He talks like a native of the South Pacific, himself.

This afternoon after lolling all morning in my underwear, studying + reading the paper we decided to find a place to go swimming. We started for the park in a cab only to find the pool closed, if you could imagine such a thing. So we started down the road (7 of us) for what we understood was "The Grove City Country Club." We hitched a ride + 3 of us were hanging onto the running board as we went down the road.

After walking through the woods to the club we found this: a 9 hole golf course which the cows graze on during the week in order to cut the grass. Then, we saw the club. It looked like somebody's dilapidated summer cottage which had been let go for 6 years. Even the screen porch was full of holes. Then there was the swimming hole. And a hole it was! It was 50 yards long + about 500 yds. wide. The water was about 3 ft. deep + the mud was 6 ft. deeper. I thought we'd never get the mud off. Even so, there were people there swimming + picnicking. That was grove City C.C. What a disillusion. (6/13/43)

On the next day's training flight, George described in detail two flight training patterns, one of which was rectangular in shape and the other resembling a dollar sign, with a straight road marking the straight lines in the middle. During this flight, signs of engine trouble occurred.

5 hour check ride

I would have done the series of stalls if the instructor had not decided that the motor was not acting properly. I enjoyed myself thoroughly on

this trip, watching everything on the ground + beginning to realize just why everything is done as it is. [This plane] had a "coughing" motor, that is, it coughed when we changed speed. The instructor was afraid of it; so we did no stalls or spins. But it did not bother me (in fear).

Then, after laying out in the grass for our next trip or for the rest of the boys to have a turn, I had my *"5 hours check ride." But in the meantime I absorbed a beautiful coat of colors, red in front, + brown in back. If we keep going, I'll get a good tan.

On the check ride I had, of course, a different instructor. All he said to me was "Take off, go to the area, + do as much of the sequence as you can." So, surprised at the mandatory instruction, I set about it. I didn't have a word with him 'til we got all the way to the area, (over the coal mine). He was watching all the time. After a while he showed me parts that I had not had. Then, we flew around a small river (at 200 ft.) looking at everybody swimming + fishing. The instructor said very little to me, the whole time. It was hot + windy up there, too. I guess I did okay on the landing, too. He explained, after we bumped a little, that hot convection currents make landings bumpy on hot days. So, I feel like I have made some progress, now. While I am up there I am conscious of everything now. It all begins to make sense; and I am beginning to coordinate myself so I can enjoy the whole thing. (6/14/43)

*The air cadets often referred to their training flights as "rides."

Several boys came running around with their gas masks on dressed in underwear

Today was terrifically hot and humid. Boy, you could hardly move around from class to class. Well, to top it all, this class of mine was slated to take the physical fitness test.

This evening I had two hours of first-aid with a Miss Post, a woman teacher at the college. This, too, is a review of Boy Scouts, in the most of it.

Tonight, the boys smelled a skunk in the dormitory, just before supper. Several boys came running around with their gas masks on dressed in underwear. Then as a joke to a fellow who was out of his room they moved his bed, desk, chair, + everything into the bathroom, down the hall. When he came to get his hat, for mess, he did not know what to do. He was

advised that they suspected him of hoarding skunks, so they fumigated his room. He caught on, after a while. (6/15/43)

Oddly, such pranks are, in a remote way, part of fighting a war. Humor and release of tension are extremely important, and every member of the armed services needs them.

How to scare some farmers

I went "up" this morning + practiced my lower sequence of making a rectangle around a land pattern, making "S" turns over a road + making figure eights over a road intersection.

Boy, I feel free + easy up there now. When we finished the maneuvers, the instructor showed me how to scare some farmers by diving on them in the field (down to 200 ft. or less). It is a wonderful feeling, swooping down low. I sure hope I get into this end of the flight training. There's nothing like being up there, I'm telling you. (6/16/43)

It was hot + sultry again, today. The last 4 days have been very similar, depressing to say the least.

The main event of the day was the "business" which we gave to the "jeeps." At noontime, we had some of them who have some talent for singing, stand on the front terrace (which runs along the front of the dormitory) + sing, while all the others paired up + danced on the sidewalk, in front. Tonight, after supper, we gave them a real session of the so-called "special instruction" as it is politely known. After giving them some "instruction" in drill we marched them to the side of the dormitory, beside the Science Hall + tried to get them to sing. They didn't give their all to it. So after warning them + giving them almost faint-provoking braces, we gave them "push-ups" + arm + finger exercises. The sweat rolled off them like water off Niagara Falls. Slowly their expressions changed from stubbornness + even joking to concerned fear over what was going to happened next. After one hour, we sent them back to the barracks wringing sweat. These boys would like a chance to hate us northerners; but most of them are okay. I got a letter from George Richey, today. He

leaves on May 29, for Camp Devens. Then, he will get 13 weeks of basic + then to O.C.S. [Officer Candidate School], if he makes the grade.

Well, I continue to eat like a horse. [Note: this was just five days after George committed to his mother on his diet plan.] The boys wonder where it all goes. Seconds at every meal + then, I'm starved. If there had been no seconds tonight of pork, cabbage, potatoes, etc., I would have gone mad, I am sure. But, I guess that is a pretty good sign. (6/17/43a)

It was like being in a cement mixer

Well, I had my 7th hour of flying, this afternoon. It was threatening to storm all afternoon; so the air was really rough! Just try + keep those things level in the wind. I did a fair job on my 600 foot rectangle, although it was a pretty hard job crabbing for the wind so that I would not get blown in or out of the rectangle. Sometimes I was heading the plane at an angle of 45 degrees with the direction in which the plane was going. It was like being in a cement mixer, today, up there. (6/17/43b)

I received Junior's letter today. He is looking for me to solo. Tell him that is not in the books.

Today, I was up at 3,000 ft., where we did a couple of spins. Boy you lose 1000 ft. of altitude in no-time, flat, in that stuff. I like to spiral down from 3,000 ft. to 600 ft. It is quite a thrill. However, it was windy, today, + I had trouble crabbing into the wind. The instructor did not say too much; but, I am not satisfied. It's pretty hard keeping those planes on an even keel, too. In flying around the rectangle, which lies near the coal mine which I mentioned, I got blown over the mine a couple of times. It sure makes you realize how important the wind is in flying directions. You have to fly almost parallel with your course, sometimes. It has been awfully windy on all my flights lately; so, it has been much harder all around.

Well, the date of departure appears to be July 3. That's less than 2 weeks from the day you receive this (Saturday). It don't look good for a trip home, either. But, if anyone comes down, the last week does not amount to much, at least hasn't, especially after Tuesday.

You can do what you wish with this patch. It's one of those things you wear on the shoulder, like Junior's star. If we get through Nashville, we get patches with wings on them, with a propeller in the center. (6/18/43)

I could not see anything

Yesterday morning, I made my ninth hour flight. It was kind of hazy, and, I could not see anything. Boy, it felt as if nothing was going right. We practiced 5 take-offs and landings, in the course of the hour.

Today, it was very hot, so I simply laid around the barracks, in my underwear. I accomplished a little studying + I answered Junior's + *Frank Trott's letters. Then we had a big confab over when the invasion will come. (6/20/43)

*Frank Trott was one of the "old timers" at the Medford Boat Club who had frequently provided George with fatherly conversation.

Reflecting on his 10 hour check ride,

I did get a real ride, this hot afternoon. I flew all over, + around Grove City + over Slippery Rock, instead of just over the old cross-roads + the coal mine. When I landed, I managed to bring it in after bumping a few times. I did not see my marks, but I assume I was average, after comparing notes with the other boys. Some feel confident, some feel discouraged + some feel "up in the air" like me.

Here's what I derived from it all. I know I like the air. Nothing bothers me, up there. It seems that I don't get alarmed enough, when we head down for forced landings. I tend to like to see her dive down towards the earth. Consequently, I would land with too much speed, if it were necessary.

Nothing they do can bother me, nervously or otherwise. What bothers me is my seemingly inability to execute the turns + banks with the proper angle of dip in the wings. Coordination of hands, + feet, is a little lax with me, too. I know this much, that I could take off + land, solo, if they would let me. I simply need a boost to insure my confidence. We'll leave it that way. So, I'm up in the air about my piloting possibilities.

About the flying, I'd like to go up in a fast plane + do loops, spins, etc., to get a real ride. I'm used to it already. Aside from my actions in making

perfect or imperfect turns, I'm game to try any maneuvers that can be done, in a plane. Well, it will probably be quite a while before I get to see airplanes, now; so, I'll just look forward, now. (6/21/43)

In ten hours, George learned the fundamentals of flying an airplane. His confidence was exploding. With this boundless optimism, he would head into the next phase of the training program at Nashville.

Having completed the introductory flying training, Section A turned its attention back to coursework and final exams. However, the men were beginning to feel and act like *short-timers*, a military term for those about to be discharged or transferred. There was more playing, diversionary conduct, and anticipating what was to come next.

Most of the movies George attended had some relationship to the war, and he referred to them in one instance as *propaganda*. They added to the men's awareness of world events, especially the war. He was unhappy about not getting time to go home and visit his family, perplexed that a few days could not be spared for this. Other things about army life were equally illogical to him. Much to his chagrin, his keen and active mind was continually trying to process things in terms of civilian logic.

Griping among servicemen is as old as war, but George was analytic about it and did recognize some positive parts. His letters reflect the entertainment culture of the day, in which possession of a radio was an exciting advantage, and a dance was a form of celebration. A few segments of George's last letters from Grove City offer valuable insights into who he was and the world in which he had come of age.

Doing our best to goof off.

This afternoon, we had two study periods. We had an enjoyable afternoon at that. Our section is beginning to take a few liberties on its own hook. So one of the boys brought a radio, in a hand bag, down for the 2 hours. We had the radio playing while some of the boys played cards

+ others slept. It would have been nice, if an officer came down + saw it. It was hot, though, some wouldn't have studied, anyhow. Then, between classes, we lay out in the grass under the trees. All of us were doing our best to "goof off" + relax.

This evening, we had the first-aid course; and, we took artificial respiration. Tomorrow we have a test on the "turbulent Balkan States" in history, a test on map contours (review) on geography + trigonometry test. So, it will be a full day. (6/22/43)

Open-post, this evening was held up until 8 o'clock because we had to attend a required movie about the causes of war in Germany, Japan, + Italy. It started way back with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. This was pointed out as the real beginning of this war, the beginning of Japanese plans for world conquest.

I sure am getting impatient to get out of here, now. But, it's like the end of any other school year. The work is heavy, during the last week, and, they hold the final exams over your head, too. I've felt unsettled + on edge ever since I got into this section. It has been as if I was behind most of the time. But, I guess I really have not. (6/23/43)

It just don't add up

This afternoon, we had a test in trigonometry: projections, artillery range problems, + other things like bearing + azimuths. I must admit that I have received some needed history background, as to the causes of the war. Then, I have had a chance to practice over my mathematics from arithmetic right through to spherical trig. But to spend 3 months on this, in relation to what could be accomplished in this army, it just don't add up. (6/24/43)

Today was blistering hot. It was one of those days when the suntans felt like over-coats. Boy, it was torrid. The old duck we have for geography was unable to last the class out, this morning. He let us go, early, then, the fact that we had to think a little in a history test on Rumania + Bulgaria made everyone's clothes sag + drip with sweat. I never sweated before, so much.

This afternoon, our section, the so-called senior class, persuaded the English teacher to give us the class out in the grass, beneath the shade of the great trees, which go to make the campus so beautiful, in spots. We all sprawled out + lay relaxed + in a daze, while he gave us some chatter about what we have covered in his course. To top it off, we detailed a young boy, on a bicycle, to go to an ice-cream store, for us. In 3 trips, he brought back 25 or 30 half-pints of ice-cream. So, our "lawn party" was climaxed. I could not help but mention it, because it is so novel an occurrence + quite unusual. But, it was a real treat, today. (6/25/43)

One thing that was never left in question was George's undying loyalty to his mother. The difficulties he was passing through, especially his absence from home, deepened that loyalty.

I keep that colored picture of you on my desk

I have not yet given up hope for our reunion. I want to see you folks, in the worst way. If I can't, I'll still think of you in church, every time. I always keep in mind what you, Ma, may have thought to be home-sickness at "A" City: That is, I'm doing my best for you, above all. I hope I never forget it. I believe that, I began to realize how good you have been to me, way back when I first enlisted. I only wish I could do something to prove it. Right now, I'm helpless. If I get by Nashville, I'll do something, believe me. The other boys keep pictures of girls on their desks all the time. I keep that colored picture of you, on my desk. Furthermore, I am glad that I never got associated with any girl, who might be attracting my attentions, these days. I have you to thank for that, Ma. Everything you have told me has been right, so far. I intend to follow your advice all the way.

No, I'm not homesick, now. I'm simply reiterating what I wrote for "A" City, to prove that it was not because of homesickness. I'm far from being homesick, believe me. But, I feel like I have a big job to accomplish. (6/25/43)

Yesterday afternoon, after inspection it rained something fierce; so, I washed some clothes and laid down, 'til supper time. It was hot + sultry. Then, after supper, I went to church + to the show, to see the gruesome picture "Hangman Must Die," the story of how the Czechs suffered + died

as hostages when the Germans spread their bloodbath after "Hangman Heydrich," the Reichsprotector in Czechoslovakia, was assassinated. It was, a bit relaxful +, at any rate, a relief from going crazy, around here. (6/27/43)

Military life tends to be made of long stretches of monotonous routine punctuated with moments of intense excitement. The obscene business of making war is juxtaposed with the humanity of the men drawn into it. There arises in a soldier's path beauty as well as ugliness, divinity opposite evil. A soldier keeps in his heart his loves, his passions, his fears, and his dreams, constantly waging war with the anonymous **olive-drab* world that surrounds him, and seeks unintentionally to extinguish his spirit.
*the official name for army green.

I received a letter from Junior today, telling me that there should be no reason why I couldn't ask the C.O. to let me come home, all circumstances considered. However, it appears that this is a bit impractical. The C.O. is an ex-college professor with absolutely no military bearing, insight, or sense. In fact, nobody ever sees him. Furthermore, he does not know what is going on, as far as the boys coming in late, etc. after open post. It is a wonder that this place gets run so well. He has high ideals of strictness, etc. but I don't think he understands all the resulting deviations, by fellows who learn the ropes.

Since there are no sanctioned furloughs in the Air-Corps, he does not feel that he could let anyone have a couple of days even though it wouldn't interfere with the program. At any rate, I don't expect to get home. We went to a "G.I." movie at Crawford Hall, tonight, depicting the power + tactics of Germany, in capturing Czech., Austria + Poland. It is real educational to see these pictures. They point out with pictures + maps, how Hitler made treaties, only to purposely violate them, in his effort to conquer the world. (6/28/43)

Broadway Marines

Then, we had a 2 hour gym class. We did some brutal exercises, including a rope climb (20 ft.), which I surprised myself by doing.

While [we] were doing the 6 laps necessary, the marines + sailors (200 of each) were in mass formation, doing a feeble assortment of exercises on the football field. As we circled the track, we had a little fun with them by asking why they couldn't come out + do some "real work," like us. We yelled "sick call" at them + called them "Broadway Marines," etc. They had no retort, for once. Finally, on the final legs, we sang the Marine hymn, the Navy song, + the Air-Corps song. They have hardly any physical training.

After supper, our section met to decide on the party for Thursday. The lieutenant (who I asked to let me go home) is organizing it. He is bribing the janitor of the U.S.O. (armory) to let us have 40 of us + 40 girls there, for a dance. He is going to smuggle ½ keg of beer, for the boys who desire it, too. I don't imagine the party will be such a great thing, though. We have to be back at 11:30 or 12. p.m. (6/29/43)

It's just bedlam around here

Well, we finished up, yesterday afternoon. No more tests or anything, now. It is a little bit of a relief to know there is no more tests to study for, anyways.

Last night started the let-down. And the boys have been raising cane ever since. All night long. They have been throwing water buckets at each other, etc. all night. Nobody can find his own mattress or bedclothes. What a mess! We just decided to move the rest of the boys out of their beds. They took some of the beds + hung them out of the window. None of the officers are supposed to know about it, of course.

Then, we had permission to stay in bed during roll-call this morning. I suppose that is one of the few times when I'll be able to enjoy such a privilege, while in the army. It's just a bedlam around here, Ma. Last night I played Ping-Pong at the U.S.O. Then, I had two sundaes to celebrate the end of school, here some of the other boys went out on the road, to have a little something more than ice-cream. They kept the party going all night. It is destined to keep going tonight, too.

Well, that's all there is to write, at present. They're trying to pull the chairs out from under me. Some of the boys got full buckets of water dumped right into their beds, on top of them. Oh, what a mess! (7/1/43)

It was a dirty joke, and they will suffer

In the afternoon, our section played a softball game against a picked team from the other sections. We won 6 to 5. I caught for 3 of the 6 innings.

Then after supper we had a dance at the U.S.O., according to plans. We had all pitched in a dollar towards the sandwiches, coca cola, pickles, + cookies which we had. That dance lasted 'til 11:30 when the boys went out to a beer joint, on the road. Everybody went whether they wanted to drink or not. So, I went along. Three other boys + myself were drinking Coca-Cola, so we ended up by having 10 cokes each.

You should have seen the rooms! The boys decided to play a joke or something on us. They tore up all the clothing, switched it around to different rooms, + then soaked everybody's belongings with water. It was a dirty joke, + they will suffer, before we go! They carried a practical joke too far. We are going to repay them without the officers knowing about it. I pity those boys, tonight. (7/2/43)

Last night everybody stayed up + talked + ate cake and candy, 'til 2:00 a.m. We had a real feast. The boys who admitted that they turned our rooms over, the other night, have been placed on a 3 week probationary period, during which they will not be allowed any privileges or open post. Some of the boys have not found all their belongings yet.

We are supposed to start at 6:00 p.m. tonight. It will be a twenty hour, or more ride on the train. In a few minutes the commanding officer is supposed to give us a farewell speech, nice of him, isn't it. He does not know one of us, most likely. Oh, well, I wonder just how much our records up here will count for. (7/3/43)

It seems as if everything is wound up, here. Probably, we will look back on all this as a dream, some day. This is a small town, the people were nice to us, but, you'd go crazy here if you stayed too long. That's all for now, so I'll sign off.

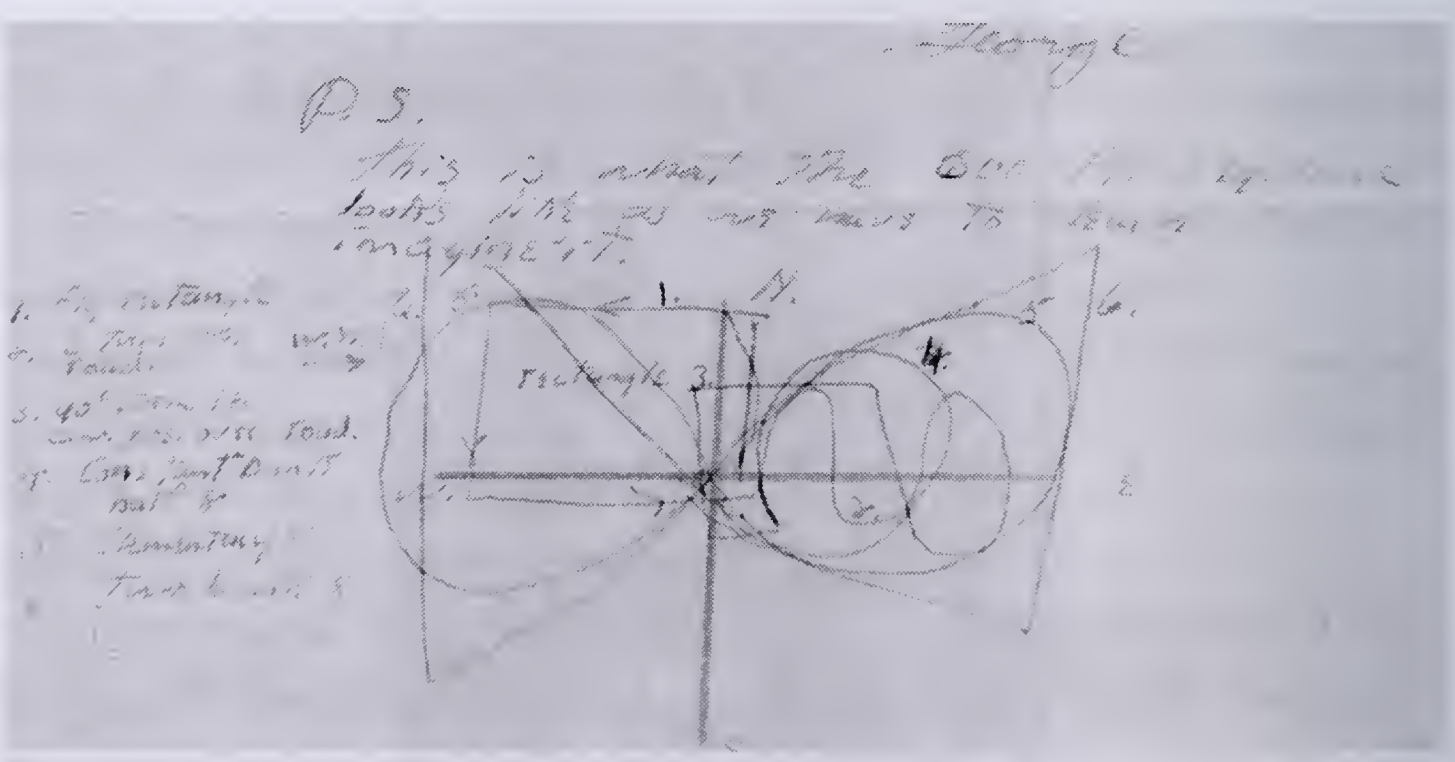
P.S. These are the student corporal stripes which I wore, here. (7/3/43)

That night, George and a hundred of his compatriots were on a train headed south.

George with buddy
Randy Martin (left).

Neilson demonstrating a “brace”
at Grove City College.

The Cub Cadet trainer at Grove City where George received 10 hours of introductory flight instruction.



One of George's many sketches of a training flight pattern at Grove City CTD.

Chapter 6

USAAF Classification Center

Nashville, Tennessee

Hitler's War Machine Extends Its Reach: Operation Barbarossa

From 1939 to 1941, the German blitzkrieg (lightning war) had overrun most of Western and Southern Europe. But the Nazis' attempt to subdue Great Britain was thwarted. In the aerial combat from July to October 1940, known as the Battle of Britain, RAF Spitfires and Hurricanes outgunned the Luftwaffe. Beginning September 7, the Luftwaffe switched from military targets to bombing London and other cities, but the British stood firm. In May 1941, Luftwaffe chief Hermann Goering called off the siege or "blitz."[1]

For the Allies, the greatest fortune of the war may have been that Hitler, emboldened by his victories in the west, made a fateful move. On June 22, 1941, in violation of a bogus nonaggression pact with Stalin, Germany invaded the Soviet Union. Launched against the advice of Hitler's general staff, Operation Barbarossa was unprecedented in scale and bloodshed.

> It was the largest invasion in the history of warfare, and German soldiers spread along a 1,800-mile-long front. They brought with them close to 3,500 tanks, over 500,000 motor vehicles, and 750,000 horses.[2]

Three German army groups, composed of almost four million troops, began a war not of conquest alone but of annihilation. Hitler's aim was to decimate Russia, creating Lebensraum (living space) for Germans. It was a brutal assault, swift in execution and

murderous in spirit. Villages were burned and civilians slaughtered. Entire armies were taken prisoner in the initial push to the capital. By November 1941, just six months after the assault began, the German armies were forty miles from Moscow. It looked as if the capital would fall by the end of the year.

Not since Napoleon had an army attempted to conquer the vast territory of Russia, and in so doing, Hitler seemed oblivious to the greatest weapon in the Soviet arsenal, the brutal Russian winter. Rains began in October that turned the roads to mud, and the German motorized Juggernaut was unable to make any forward progress. The rains gave way to an early, ferocious winter. German troops, unprepared for cold weather in the assumption the blitzkrieg would be swift, were freezing as well as starved of materiel and human needs. Only 15 percent of the Wehrmacht's 100,000 vehicles in the region were serviceable in these conditions. The misery that Germany had wreaked upon the masses of Europe began to be visited upon its once proud army.

Despite the devastating loss of the Ukrainian capital of Kiev in late summer, the Soviets went on the offensive and pushed the Germans back in the north. The Wehrmacht command had underestimated the tenaciousness with which the Russians were to defend their homeland. Germany lacked the industrial base to wage war across the Soviet giant, actually an empire of twenty Socialist republics of which Russia was the largest. The Soviets mobilized their industries to rapidly overcome the obsolete machinery of their armed forces before the war. After November 1941, the battle lines went back and forth in various parts of the country. Stalin transferred twenty-five divisions from Siberia to the front. In the summer of 1942, hoping to access the oil resources of the Caucasus, the German armies attacked the Volga River city of Stalingrad, named for the Soviet dictator. The Soviets defended their city with the intent of fighting to the last man. Some of the most gruesome urban combat of World War II, indeed any war, took place at Stalingrad. The beleaguered and freezing troops fought block by block, house by house, and room

by room in the rubble jungle of the city. For the Soviets, Stalingrad became the symbol of the national will to survive.

By the end of 1942, the German Sixth Army was surrounded at the Volga front. All lines of supply were cut off. After weeks of bitter struggle, the Wehrmacht was starving, out of ammunition, and freezing to death. Hitler refused permission for the German commander, General Friederich von Paulus, to surrender. Yet seeing no end but complete annihilation of his army, Paulus surrendered Stalingrad on February 2, 1943. One hundred thousand German troops were taken prisoner. This was the turning point of the war on the eastern front. It would be two and a half years before the Red Army drove the Germans back to Berlin, but from Stalingrad onward, German hopes of conquering the expansive lands of the USSR faded. Some twenty million Soviet citizens perished in the war, more than the sacrifices of any other nation in the conflict, and one-third of the sixty million deaths attributed to the Second World War.[3]

The engagement of Germany in the vast expanse of the USSR may have provided the reprieve the United States needed to gain a slippery foothold in the fight for the Pacific. After suffering a series of setbacks following Pearl Harbor, including the fall of the Philippines, the United States Navy was finally able to achieve a tide-turning victory at a tiny atoll just northeast of Hawaii where the Japanese had concentrated their forces. On June 4, 1942 at Midway Island, the US Navy sank four Japanese carriers while losing only one. It broke the high-water mark of Japanese superiority in the Pacific, putting the empire on the defensive for the remainder of the war. Thus began a thirty-eight-month campaign of deadly island hopping back to the Japan.[4]

Despite the German defeat at Stalingrad, the dreaded swastika flew unfettered from Sicily in the south, to Hammerfest in Arctic Norway, from the Atlantic coast to hundreds of miles inside Russia. As yet, no coordinated Allied ground offensive had been launched on the European continent.

During the terrible days of 1942 when the economic heart of the Soviet Union was in German control, the desperate Stalin

pleaded with Roosevelt and Churchill to open a second front to relieve pressure on the Soviets. Initially critical of the Western Allies' alleged lack of action, Roosevelt in a visit to Moscow made an offer that got the Soviet leader's attention. The second front was to be the aerial bombardment of Germany from bases in England. Stalin bought it. All of the belligerents in this new, technological war understood that victory would hinge on air power.

Hitting Bottom in Nashville

Grove City was only the beginning of a twenty-month process that would train George Neilson to pilot one the war's most formidable aircrafts into the fight for the continent of Europe. Months of rigorous classroom and flight instruction lay ahead.

The greatest challenges of being in the armed services are often mental. Anxiety is created by uncertainty over "what next?" A recruit is at the mercy of the great military machine. And it is a machine that works much differently than the civilian apparatus. In many ways, a military organization is like a totalitarian state. The absence of competition in any monopoly results in inefficiency, for which the military is notorious. Given that military organizations have constantly changing mandates based on the national defense situation, and this was especially the case in World War II, it is understandable that refining operations was an elusive objective. For the rank and file, this translates into a continuous round of passive harassment.

Rumors fill the void of certainty, stoking the angst felt by servicemen, particularly those in training. As one advances through the different phases of training, there is the mystique of greener pastures ahead. When the next phase is reached and the hoped-for improvement is disappointed, the result is discouragement. George mentioned frequently in his letters a sense of helplessness. The realization that one's fate lies almost entirely outside his control is threatening, and there is no good way out. It is fortunate that human beings are so highly adaptable. If the situation does not change, the serviceman changes or adapts to

the surroundings. Thus, these times of extreme discouragement tend to be short-lived. Having a positive attitude helps. George developed this trait and was frequently able to express it, after also crying out in his letters for his family to recognize his plight. George recognized that everything in life, no matter how irrelevant or unpleasant it was, had worth as a growing experience. Clearly, his mother's love and a desire to make her proud of him motivated the young man to push on and resist the constant temptation to capitulate to adversity. He also had a strong sense of duty, and though there were times when he stepped outside the rules a little, he was a tremendously obedient individual. It was no accident that he was on a direct bearing to become an officer.

The hot and filthy train ride from Pittsburgh to Nashville was a fitting prelude to what the young Neilson discovered to be a new province of hell. His first letters from the classification center illustrate George's eloquent, almost humorous prose in describing things negative.

> Oh!, but there's no incentive here to act like a human being. (7/8/43)

This comment could rightly stand as an overture to George's description of the Air Corps Classification Center. The following will attest that it was a diabolical filth pit from which only ice cream, a female being, and a little positive thinking could rescue him. The young man hoped to emerge from Nashville as a pilot in training or *air cadet*. He knew this short phase would be difficult and crucial. But it seemed that every imaginable aspect of the place was carefully designed to induce contempt for the air corps.

TRAINING STAGE #III – AIR CORPS CLASSIFICATION CENTER, NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

On an early June day, 1943, reality reared its ugly head as we left pleasant Grove City, aboard "old" railroad coaches, for a journey to Nashville, Tn. It developed that all railroad trips, during the war period, were to be in miserable, unkempt, old, smelly

coaches, usually for 24 hrs. so that you would have a restless night trying to sleep in a coach seat. Food, generally poor, was prepared in a military mess-kitchen-car. Naturally, the engines were the old "Choo-Choo" smoke and steam driven types that pumped soot into the open windows and doors of the un-air-conditioned coaches. Adding to the misery of this unpleasant travel was always the "wonderment" of where we were going and what would be next. We were never told, in advance.

The Nashville stop was about as temporary as one could expect. The "base" consisted of tarpaper-covered barracks, located "down by the railroad yards." It appeared like and felt like a prisoner of war camp.

However, the purpose of the Classification Center was vital: for everyone who visited there learned his destiny-to-be in the Air Corps. We were all exposed to a wide range of tests: written or psychological, to determine the aptitudes of individuals for the various flying responsibilities. The testing was entitled "A.R.M.A.," Aptitude Rating for Military Aeronautics. Here they determined whether each trainee could best respond to training for: pilot, navigator, bombardier, or not at all. Thus, everyone approached the testing in a spirit of apprehension. After the week-long testing, we watched rosters, daily, in a state of apprehension, while here, wondering, watching lists as classifications were decided and posted.

I had indicated a desire to be a navigator, simply because I felt that was my best tendency, vs. pilot training. One day, my name was on a special list, to appear before the classification board. It seemed that I had qualified for pilot training; and, the directors of the testing wanted to know if I would accept that assignment. "Pride" hit me, as I made the decision "yes," because being a pilot was the more prestigious duty. However, I never felt certain as to whether my qualification for pilot training was better or perhaps the classification center's need to supply more pilots took priority.

The Air Corps classification program earned a long-standing reputation for excellence, in terms of the performance of the people who experienced it. In later years, they wrote follow-up letters to

the men who had experienced the classification in an effort to trace their life's activities, after leaving the service.

While at Nashville, we all grew anxious to move away from the dismal circumstances. Always, we lived with rumors as to where we would be sent for training. I recall that one rumor, spawned by men from the northeastern states, had us going to Mitchell Field, Hempstead, Long Island [New York], which would have been the answer to a dream, to have training close to home. Lonesomeness and homesickness was part of everybody's thinking at this early stage of military life. The stay in Nashville lasted 3 weeks. (G.H.N., 1991)[5]

We are herded like cattle

I arrived here at 3:00 p.m. today. We were on the train since 7:00 p.m. Saturday, yes, day coaches, too! Oh, they said they tried to get Pullmans, like the other fellows had. We had to sleep in the one car (40 of us). There was plenty of room in the dirty, filthy car, to sit down. But when it came to sleeping, + we had to tear the seats apart + improvise beds, that was a different story. We had to sleep on top of each other. Was it hot + miserable? Wow! But, we got by + managed to even sleep, a bit. When we arrived, we were filthy, from head to foot.

Now here I am in the army again. Boy, this place is, as advertised, the end of the world. It consists mainly of a mass of tar-paper houses similar to Camp Edwards, only not so substantial. Each barrack holds 66 men. Our barrack includes the entire group of us from Grove City. We came on the train with a group of 200 from Pittsburgh. This place lies several miles to the east of Nashville, on the east side of the Cumberland River. We saw the city, only as we crossed the bridge, from the distance.

Oh what a filthy place. The uniform here is fatigues. The boys who have been classified are wearing their cadet uniforms. We are herded like cattle. But, it isn't as if I was at Atlantic City, for the first time. I'll take whatever they got, now.

Here's how it works. Right now, we are herded into casual "barracks," where we have no sheets or pillow slips, just 2 blankets. When they begin

to classify us, we will be moved up "on the hill," as they say. Then we will get treated better + we will get sheets, etc.

Right now, until they begin on us, the idea is to beat the wrap on "K.P." + guard duty, + other work details. If we get through here, there will be no more of that stuff, but, it's supposed to be the thing to goof off from, while here. Everybody is here for only one thing, to get out. There is no more beauty to the place than to a big orchard of chicken coops. It may be two weeks or two months, depending on the need for men.

I understand that they shipped 4,000 to Maxwell Field last week, for pre-flight school. So, everybody that comes this weekend forms the new contingent, here. By the way, we are supposed to be A.S. (aviation students) until classified. (7/4/43)

George's brother Bob came for a visit while he was on convalescent leave from the army. This lifted his spirits considerably.

Yesterday afternoon I saw Bob

Well, yesterday afternoon I saw Bob. It was a thrill, let me tell you. You don't know how it felt when I first saw him. He found the office and arranged with a lieutenant for me to have a pass to go to Nashville. He did this before I saw him. When I returned to my barrack after 4:30, the boys said he was waiting for me, at the C.Q. office.

So, I went + found him. Boy! He looked great. I hardly knew what to say to him. So, I got dressed up + we went into town. He had been at the Hermitage Hotel, but he wanted to move, because of the noise. So, we went across to the Andrew Jackson Hotel, a very fine place. All the time he was telling me all the experiences. He changed his clothes + we went into the "Commodore Room," where we had an elite chicken dinner. It was an air conditioned dining hall, with an orchestra, etc. It was wonderful, the whole thing.

It took two hours (7 to 9) for us to eat, as he was telling me all the tales. Of course, I kept cross-examining him. I could hardly imagine that he could have gotten out of that mess [at Guadalcanal], safely. What good fortune he did have! The time really flew, Ma. I don't think that

I'll ever forget this meeting. It really felt good, walking down the street with him, too. Well, Ma, this finished a perfect day, a perfect reunion. I don't know how it could have been more pleasant, except if you could have been there.

I got the candy + the magazine, Ma. I want to thank you over + over for your part in making this meeting possible. Bob told me how you insisted on providing for it. Boy! He bought me a real dinner + provided everything. It was perfect, the whole thing. I don't know how to thank you. I hope to see him, today again. He is coming down + is going to try + get me out, again. (7/6/43)

It was a thrill of a lifetime

You people may not be able to understand just what this meeting of Bob + myself has meant to me. It was a thrill of a lifetime. There was something stimulating about it that made me feel good.

Last evening, at 6:00 p.m., he came up here + managed to have me given a pass to Nashville, despite the fact that we are quarantined, here for 2 weeks. The "know thing" [officer], 90 day wonder in charge told Bob, at first, that Bob had been an officer long enough to know the rules, about a man being let out of quarantine. Bob's blood boiled; but, with a little polite pressure, on Bob's part, he wrote a pass 'til 11:00 o'clock.

So, for the second evening in a row, I was able to go to Nashville with Bob. As far as we know we ate in the second of the two best restaurants in town, the Hermitage Grill, of the Hermitage Hotel. It was something extraordinary! I had a lamb chop dinner + Bob had a salmon. We would have had steak, but, they were all served up.

Ma + Betty, you can't realize how nice it was talking. I never had any idea that we could get along so well, in conversation. The wealth of experience that he has had is really something.

The time flew, too. We ate + talked from 7:00 to 9:00 p.m. Then, we walked up the street, a bit and sat on the steps of the State Capitol building. It was dark + quiet, there, as we sat overlooking the blazing-hot city.

We talked about things that he and I had never talked about, before: mostly about you, Ma. We both discovered that we were carrying the same

picture of you, with us, all the time. You know, the smiling one, near the rose bushes which Betty sent me, at Grove City. He carried it all through the battle. I was so pleased to hear his attitude towards you. I have a thousand things to tell you, but, they'll take time, since I don't have too much time to write from here. (7/7/43a)

There was some divine power that wanted him to come back

I think that it will take me quite a while to forget that reunion with Bob. I guess it is the first time that we ever spoke pleasantly, together. We swapped one another's viewpoints, too. As we sat on the capitol steps, it seemed that we answered all the questions that we had in mind, one way or another. I was listening intently to the stories which he told me. I hope I can remember the whole picture, as he described it to me. He'll always have that experience to fall back upon as conversation. He also told me some of the less pleasant things which he didn't tell you. Boy! There was some divine power that wanted him to come back home to you; for, there was no other reason why he is able to tell about it.

Bob told me, in detail, of how the airplanes operated over the islands in their short-handed efforts to stem the Japs. Did he tell you of his chances to "ride" in a dive-bombing mission as a gunner? I told him he should have taken the opportunity.

Now, Ma, I must tell you about this place. It surely is not pleasant. The best way to tell you is to repeat what a young officer told us. He said that he had seen prison camps which were more pleasant. We live in tarpaper shacks. The beds are lined up, side by side. The food is terrific. When we were in the casual area (first 2 nights), we had no sheets, pillows or anything, just 2 blankets + a dirty mattress. Tuesday, a.m., we moved up, here, on the hill, where they assigned us to permanent barracks + issued sheets and pillows.

Flies, flies and more flies

A morale officer spoke to us, today, saying that the Air Corps is plotting to get us to hate the training, before they let us like it. He admitted that they were going to work us + make it miserable (K.P., details, guard

duty, etc.) until we wanted to quit. The conditions are really horrible here. You should see the latrines, water fountain right beside the urinals, flies, flies, + more flies, dirt + filth, galore. It is disgusting.

Then, the drinking water. That is almost as hot as the air, here. It has been around 100o, these past days. The sun actually burns you. At the mess hall, you can only get one cup full of ice-water, if you can imagine that. You actually must get cold water, to exist, here. With the water so warm, you must drink all day long, at the latrines.

The food is, truly, not worth eating. You get ½ bowlful of milk in the morning, that's all for the day. There's hardly anything worth eating, so far.

Then the heat. Bob could not stand the heat of the days, which he spent in Nashville waiting for the evening to come. Meanwhile, we have been marching + waiting in lines. What a let-down from Grove City. Not that I did not expect something. But, the fellows never referred to the conditions, here. We wear only our fatigues, all day + all evening, all the time we are on this post.

Now, for the routine. We will march, do P.T. (physical training) + do the details, until we take our tests (nobody knows when). Then, after classification, we do these details until we are shipped to the next post. So, I have some weeks of misery to look forward to.

Here it is like the end of the world

Now, Ma, I realize that I will have a mental relapse here, as at Atlantic City. The reason I did so well at Grove City is because I had a job cut out for me, a planned program. Here it is like a concentration camp; and my natural tendency to worry makes me much depressed, mentally. Up there, it was refined + inspirational. Here, it is like the end of the world. The officers say that this will be like the bottom of the lowest part of Air Corps training. Of course, if I get through classification in a few days, I won't mind it too much; because I'll know where I'm heading.

The other boys are really griping + depressed. All sad faces around here, in these horrible surroundings. You see, this place is about a 15 minute bus ride from the city of Nashville. Our particular barracks is stacked right alongside of the Louisville-Nashville freight yards. We live

"out of our barracks bags" now, Ma. I'm glad that I did not land here, instead of Atlantic City. I would have been totally homesick. You see the mental strife of not knowing whether or not you'll ever get beyond here has been going on since I entered this army.

Another item, here is naturally the poor officers. But, I'm used to that now. They are all young second lieutenants + they know nothing. But, at least there is some sort of a plan, as bad as it is. At least they know where you are, all the time.

A veritable horror of drudgery and unpleasantness

You see there is no object to being at this post, except the week of tests which determine your qualifications. Built around this, however, is a veritable horror of drudgery and unpleasantness. So folks, if I don't continue to write such letters, which indicate interest, it is because there is no incentive to write a decent letter. But, I'll write to you, no matter how it is. You should know about everything, Ma.

That's the news, Ma. It's not pleasant, true. But, I guess, later, I'll look back on it as experience. I'll just make the most of it. But, there are no pleasures here. There is no place in the state, to go swimming. So that's out. I sure hope I make it without any hitches.

Bob said, the other night, that you have probably done as much as he has done in this war simply by staying home + helping. You see, he realizes that you have worries which he didn't have, in the army. It makes a difference how many things you have to think about. You know (home, school, first-aid, the garden, etc.) We appreciate it. That's what we talked about, last night. (7/7/43b)

We sickled grass and raked stones

Today, I began doing details. There is no sign of classification, yet. However my group was fortunate enough to have only a maintenance detail, during which we sickled grass + raked stones, around a company street from 8:00 'til 4:00 p.m., with time for dinner. But, it was roaring hot + uncomfortable, although we took it as easy as possible, all the day.

The food today, was not too bad, although we can't get a cool drink of water, here. Oh!, But there is no incentive here to act like a human being.

Tonight, 5 of us slipped out of the 2 week quarantine which keeps our squadron in, to take in "Stage Door Canteen," at one of the two camp theatres. Boy, it's worthwhile. It also lifted my spirits, quite a bit. In the way up, I visited the P.X. for a pint of Sealtest ice-cream. It is very good (15 cents per pint). So, I had quite an experience of taking chances, tonight. But it was within reason of sense, although not within the rules. A fellow must do something to lift his spirits here. I have seen many of the fellows with whom I was associated at Atlantic City. Many of them are classified + many here come + gone. Boy! If I don't make it now. I'm glad I went to the show. It made my mind much lighter, tonight. (7/8-9/43)

It is a concentration camp

I had another day on this *x!# post today (if you get what I mean). It seems that every place I get, they have added something new to the training. As you realize, as far as getting anywhere as a result of the 4 previous months, there is no such thing. If only Junior had fixed me up to go to Nashville, in February.

In an orientation lecture today, a captain told us that this is not a training post, but the main purpose is classification. The details + drilling + all the filth of living is supposed to fit us, when + if we become officers, to realize the position of enlisted men, + understand what they go through. Yes, but up until a few weeks ago, everybody that came here for classification had nothing to do except to get through the tests and wait to ship out. Now, look at it. It is a concentration camp. We have to prepare our beds for inspection, tomorrow, as if it were at Grove City, even though it is virtually + practically impossible to do so, especially with sagging cots, + dust ridden barracks.

The dumb 2nd lieutenant who is in charge of the squadron knows nothing. All the boys gripe + he hardly knows how to express himself when he attempts to speak to us. Today, everybody came out for formation lackadaisically. He made us march for a solid hour, this evening, through the dust + grime through which we went all day. This is like Atlantic City. We are worse than the lowest privates, after 4 months in the army. If I had

been drafted I would be far better off, I am sure. I wouldn't mind if it were that everyone had to go through with it. But, they don't. Boys in my class who joined the marines + navy from B.U., now have their commissions. The boys get so discouraged here, that they act like imbeciles + further arouse the ire of the second *lewies.

I don't know, Ma. All I can say is that I'll keep punching, for you. I can think of no other reason, right now. 4 months at this, + they still laugh at us going to be "aviation cadets." I can't get it through me. Well, I'd better stop this crying on paper + go to bed. I suppose it will get better, though. (7/9/43)
*Slang - lieutenants.

Such was the discouraged young recruit's plunge into a miserable episode after the relative pleasantries of the CTD. The letters depict George's struggle to remain positive in the face of drudgery. His anxiety was rooted in the unknown. In such circumstances, the mind suggests that there may be no end of the present adversity, which intensifies the anguish. It also postulates that in the present state of mind, success will be impossible, resulting in a continuing downward spiral of events, leading to an abyss of destruction. This plays out in clinical depression. What George needed was to see forward movement. Though progress was subtle and almost imperceptible, the next letter suggests some brightening.

It was not too bad, today. (7/10/43)

George dodged K.P. by a list discrepancy. He reported but was not called. He survived the inspection in "these filthy barracks." During the inspection, Neilson and some of the men were tapped for the Saturday morning military "parade." It was terrifically hot, and the dust was awfully thick. The affair took up the entire morning. There was physical training later, and then they were off for the weekend.

I lay on my bed, lazy + sweltering with the heat. A group which was allowed to go to the P.X. brought back an ice-cream to me. Later on, I went with another group to find one of the camp chapels + go to confession. After accomplishing this, we took the liberty of going into a camp restaurant + had a cold drink. (7/10/43)

After supper George and seven cohorts, hoping to avoid the blistering hot daytime "KP," signed on to a night stint and wound up shelling peas for six and a half hours.

He continued to hand out sandwiches, cold pork chops, iced tea

In the meantime we talked with all the officers, sergeants, etc., who straggled in after something to eat. The sergeant, in charge of us, comes from deep in Georgia + was he funny! He kept swearing up + down that he would not feed anyone else who came into the mess hall, looking for a midnight snack. But, he continued to hand out sandwiches, cold pork chops, iced-tea, etc. At 11:30, he prepared a snack for us. We had bacon, egg + tomato sandwiches + cookies. Then, after working from 12:15-2:30, we went to sleep until 4 o'clock when we were relieved. So, as far as having to do K.P. is concerned, it was not too unpleasant.

Well, it seems that the perspective has changed a bit. I feel that I can get along here. But, the mental anguish which surrounds me while waiting for the tests, is wicked. You know what I mean. I worry too much for my own good; but, I can't help that. I suppose when I know where I'm headed, there will be something else to worry about. But, if I get through here I won't worry too much about the rest of it.

This afternoon, I lay in my roasting hot bunk for 2 ½ -3 hours + I got some rest, catching up with some sleep which I lost last night. However, I may safely sum up this past week by saying that I was lazy + laid down at every opportunity. Of course the fact that I had nothing on my mind is almost driving me crazy. But, still it is a relaxation, I suppose. I imagine that you understand, by this time, how my mind wanders when it is not pre-occupied with studying or something. I guess that is due to the pressure which used to be on me.

I went along with the boys, this evening to see "Bataan," a horrible picture which depicts the heroic efforts of one patrol of men, who attempted to keep the Japs from rebuilding a bridge which the Americans had destroyed in order to move troops + supplies along the Bataan Peninsula. It was not at all pleasant, one of the most awe inspiring pictures I've ever seen. (7/10/43)

Embellishing George's account of this movie, in May 1942, after a gallant defense of the Corregidor Island fortress in Manila Bay off the tip of the Bataan Peninsula, Lt. Gen. Jonathan Wainwright surrendered his marines and all the American forces on the Philippines. Following the capitulation, thousands of vanquished Allied men were marched to a jungle prison camp. With little food and water, the faltering troops were beaten and shot en route by the Japanese guards. The Bataan Death March stands as one of the most infamous episodes in the Pacific war, in which the Japanese became viewed as ruthless, inhumane killers.

For George and his squadron, the punishing battery of physical, psychological, and academic testing began July 13.

Eight grueling hours of mental examination

Today, I underwent 8 grueling hours of mental examination. This "Psychological Testing Unit" is the only efficient part of the army which I have contacted so far. They marched us into a nice air-conditioned room, + up to desks which are separated like polling booths. They give exacting + complete instructions over a public address system. We had 14 tests on math, algebra, maps, aerial photographs, dial reading, math speed tests, etc. – 14 of them. Each one was timed + preceded by specific instructions, all of which put us under pressure for 8 hours, with time out for lunch. The tests are objective multiple choice affairs which are drawn up by psychologists. For that reason, it is difficult to tell what they were trying to measure. (7/13/43)

The idea is that they try + find out all facts about you + have them available when they talk to you. They try to see if you have a balanced personality with sound ideas + judgment. This test, which I'll receive one

of these days, is called the A.R.M.A., "Adaptability Rating for Military Aeronautics." This is a most important test.

This morning we had to go "out on a limb" + state our preference which will be used, if we qualify in all departments. We had to give so many points to each of the 3 types of training, to indicate their relative importance in our mind. I scored them like this:

Navigator – 9
Pilot – 7
Bombardier – 6

This is based on my own judgment as to what I think I would be best at, as a result of training + experience. I had talked with teachers, etc. + I have always had a feeling that if I got the chance I'd do best at navigation. Anyway, we'll see. I understand that they want you to put down pilot, for preference, unless you have a good reason to do otherwise. Each statement which you make will be questioned by a psychiatrist to see if the ideas are sound, or just whims. However, the physical exam usually determines the limits of qualifications. (7/13/43)

Deep inside, George wanted to be a pilot. However, his sense of duty moved him to provide an objective appraisal of his preference. Context suggests his purpose in favoring navigation may have also been strategic, believing the evaluators would be impressed with his honest appraisal of his strengths.

Two hours playing with toys and machines

Tomorrow, I will have the 2nd of the 4 phases of testing. This is called the "psychomotor" tests. They determine your sense of balance, equilibrium, etc. The boys say that it is like the penny arcade. You spend two hours playing with toys + machines. I'll tell you all about them, tomorrow night, Ma.

Today was blasting hot, as usual, but the air-conditioned room took the curse of most of it. But, when we returned from tests, at 3:30 p.m., we had to dress up in our suntans + march out to stand retreat. That consists of a parade + standing in the sun, for about 1 ½ hours. (7/13/43)

The cadet described these tests in exhaustive detail over six pages, complete with illustrations. For the sake of illustration only, the complete text of George's very shortest delineation of a test follows.

Test No. 4 – This was the most difficult. The object was to keep an electrical stylus which was much like a dentist's hand drill, on a small gold spot, which was located on a rotating disk, the size of a phonograph record. When the stylus was on the spot, an electrical contact recorded the time on a meter. The object was to have the most total amount of time "on the spot," after about 20 trials.

Boy, I was chasing that disk, all the time. I could never catch it. The only way I could get it on the spot, was to scratch across it, whenever I got near to it. Everyone has trouble with it. The spot rotates like a regular phonograph. Nobody had many seconds of time on it. (7/14/43)

The atmosphere here is definitely too goof off

The atmosphere here is, definitely too goof off. Everybody wanders, everywhere, despite quarantine + restrictions, during the evening. When they come into the barracks looking for "volunteers" or *"P.T." or some other formation, all the boys file out the back door to the P.X. or under the barracks, etc. Why not? There's nothing to be gained, here, except the classification. After we get classified, it will be tough 'til we ship though. (7/14/43)

*Physical Training

Well, I had it pretty easy today. With the customary day of intervention between our psychological and our physical exams, the entire squadron was assigned to details. That I had taken night K.P. last Saturday saved me from getting that long siege of day K.P. They made me a "runner" at the squadron headquarters. My job was to locate boys or things whenever they desired. I just sat in the orderly room, until an officer yelled for a runner. Consequently, I lay on the *C.Q.'s bed, all morning. I had a beautiful snooze. It was terrifically hot + I was terribly lazy, anyhow.

The officers, down here, "goof off" as much as we do. They know that we hate the place + they do too. But, they try to enforce a gig-system, like Grove City. This is to try + make us keep our barracks neat + clean (of course, that is impossible).

One of the boys from Maine, who came down with us, started home to Caribou today. He got a 7 day furlough because his father is dying from T.B. One of the 5 boys who left Grove City ahead of the rest of us, was "washed-out," because he failed to pass the A.R.M.A. This is the interview with the psychiatrist. He'll probably go to Jefferson Barracks, in Missouri, to be re-classified in the ground crew. There's plenty to keep one thinking, while awaiting the tests. But, I'm reasonably confident that I'll be okay. (7/15/43)

*C.Q. – Charge of Quarters

The A.R.M.A.

At any rate, I took my first day physical exams, at 10:30 a.m., this morning. The first thing consisted of a private interview with a psychiatrist, the A.R.M.A. I had a young lieutenant who was yawning + sleepy from the terrific heat. Consequently, he didn't care too much about asking questions, or the like. So, he sat down, before me, yawned, stretched + asked about my medical history. Then he said, "Give me a summary of your life history." Of course, that was a bad question for I didn't know what to say. So, I started off + told him of how I was always a bright student, until I got to college, etc. I was always conscientious, I never failed in anything I had tried, etc. He asked all about my education, sports, interests, etc. I responded to my best advantage, I think.

What about the family background? I told him about Pa killing himself with hard work + you being a very watchful, careful mother (there being no sickness in the family). I told him all about Bob, Junior, and Betty.

Then, he said, "With your interest in boats, why did you not join the Navy?" I told him that I had been asked before. But, I never had been associated with anyone who went into the navy or wanted me to. Besides, I never had a yearning to go to sea. I told him that I had made a bid for navigation + I explained that, that was where my qualifications were

best. "Okay," he said, "but what if they make you a pilot?" (You see they try to see if everyone at least desires to be a pilot.) I said without basis, that I could do a good job, I thought. I had no fears of it + would like to be a pilot, just as quick as a navigator. You see, it is very important that you answer that you want to be a pilot, and, if you are otherwise qualified (physically), they'll make you that. But, pilot is the premonition + if you have no desires for that, they'll wash you out. This A.R.M.A. is pretty tricky, as you can see + they wash out as many for this as for the straight physical.

From top to bottom, they take you apart

Well, tomorrow the climax is at hand. I'll go up to the hospital at 7:30 a.m. for my final physical. You must imagine the mental suspense that surrounds this thing. I understand that it's the real McCoy, too. From top to bottom, they take you apart. From what I hear, nobody can pass the eye test; but, most everybody who says so has passed it, understand? It's awful, thinking about what might be wrong with me. But, I'm confident that all will be okay. (7/16/43)

Yesterday, I went through the 4 hour physical almost perfectly. Although I had less trouble than I thought I could have, it makes me mad to think that I must go back for a re-check on one of the many eye tests. You, see, over ½ of the time is spent on examining the eyes. I have to wait 'til Monday to take the re-check. That may hold up my classification for a day or so. Every little thing like that bothers me. However, many of the boys have to take re-checks on any of the 1,000 different things, including the A.R.M.A.

I have been out on a gulley-digging detail since 8:00, this morning. It has been about 100 degrees out in the sun; I have not been to church.

On the physical exam, they examined our nose, ears + throat at one time. Of course, I had to wait a couple of minutes to have my ears cleaned out before I got through. Then the dentist checked my teeth (as I said my prayers). He put me in class 4, though, which means that there is no work to be done to make them satisfactory. But, what more work could be done to my teeth? I ask you.

The final test was an examination of our body's form. One of the doctors questioned that little bunch of skin, which I was anxious about before I left (remember?). But another doctor assured him that it was all right. I was scared for a little while though.

We spend our spare time eating Sealtest ice-cream at the P.X. But, it is so hot down here that we all have dropped 8 to 10 lbs., in these past two weeks. Oh, how I wish I was classified + had my cadet issue. Let's hope, that this will take place sometime this week. Many of the boys have more serious re-checks than I, in the offing, so I suppose I should not get too excited over it. But, it's hard anyway.

Well, Ma, I went to church at 5:00 p.m., a special mass for all those on detail, etc. That's something new for me. Then, I ate at a camp restaurant (for a change). Then, I went to the movies + saw Abbott + Costello in "Hit the Ice" or something like it. It was real funny. (7/18/43)

This is an awful rumor clinic

One thing is for sure. You'll never get a furlough after leaving here. There are many ways to get a furlough, here, after you are classified. All of them revolve about lies which the boys get their parents to concoct about sickness + death, + get them to send telegrams to that effect. The supposed legal excuses for furloughs have to do with farm work or "unfinished business" at home. That's all you hear, down here, among the boys who are waiting around to be shipped from this place. I'll let Junior know how things shape up, when I get classified. Then, he should know how to make some sort of a request or something. There is no reason for not getting one here, if you have to wait around. It is all in the knowing how.

So, as far as I know, my examinations are complete. It is now a matter of the unknown wait until my name is posted. It may be several days or it may only be a few. You'll know as soon as it happens. In the meantime, this is an awful rumor clinic. Boys trying to figure how they should wash out, etc. Boy, they are washing out, around here, too. Some boys who never had re-checks have received notice. Boy, it's tough. They have only "J.B." (Jefferson Barracks, Mo.) to look forward to. And, that's no fun. One of the boys from Grove City who came down ahead of us, washed-out on his A.R.M.A. (7/19/43)

George described the many maladies that caused boys to have a "re-check" or to be put in the hospital for treatment or observation. Anecdotally, the hospital was quite the place to go, describing it as "the life of Riley" in so many words.

Gruesome Gables

For the want of something to do, they had a morale meeting in a theatre this afternoon. A protestant chaplain spoke to us. He referred to these black barracks as "Gruesome Gables." You have to go out of your way to find something pleasant to occupy yourself. That is why the hospital was a welcome spot, for a few hours, tonight.

Going to + from the tests, I have been frequenting the P.X.s + restaurants for ice-cream + milk. I have been really goofing lately. We are all taking every opportunity to be lazy + "gold brick" for, this is the last place where we will ever have a chance to do so, for the training is really intense, beyond here. (7/19/43)

This is the period of Tennessee which I am going through, now. There is no telling when it will be posted, what I am to be trained for. It may be a day or two, or it may be a week. I found that 70 of 200 of our squadron had to go back for various re-checks on everything. Some of the boys from Grove City who were in the other squadron, in this section, have already received their notices. They all have been made pilots (i.e. 10 out of the 40 of us.) Some of the fellows who indicated navigation for their first choice, as I did, got pilot just the same. The chances are pretty good that unless you have something physically defective, you will be classified as a pilot. Well, folks, you have an idea of the suspense which prevails over the situation, here. (7/20/43)

While awaiting the verdict on his training assignment, George ventured into a subject in his letters that attests to his willingness to share everything in his mind and heart with his mother and sister. The subject was girls.

We had a ½ hour P.T. drill, this morning, during which we played volleyball. Then we drilled for another hour. After that, we went to a theatre for a "G.I." movie on protecting military information.

The chaplain advised all to watch their step in Nashville

In the afternoon, we attended another movie + an address by a chaplain. The movie was the weirdest thing you ever saw, on venereal diseases. Boy! What sights. They showed how these things infect the different parts of the body. It made some of the boys sick, to see it, too.

The Protestant chaplain spoke on the general prevention of diseases + the spiritual motivations also. He also told of the conditions in Nashville, one of the worst cities, for this, in the nation. They average 600 new cases of venereal diseases per week here (that is, the civilians of the city) + for each case there are 4 or 5 unreported. The chaplain advised all to watch their step in Nashville, where the girls pick up the men + there is a terrible amount of drunkenness.

Well I don't know why I mention these things. They never have bothered me, yet. I never have thought that I would ever get into any of these difficulties. All I do is not ever go looking for any girls. That seems to be easy enough. I guess I can wait 'til it's all over before I bother with any of them. In my few escapades at home, I found it was not worth wasting money + time on anyone when I did not know well enough or feel that there is no time to think of them, to say nothing of picking up a strange girl who I'll never see again.

I met one in particular who was a real girl

At Grove City where the town was small, of course a few of the girls at the U.S.O. got to know us. I met one in particular who was a real girl. She came to the U.S.O. to play the piano + dance with boys whom she thought were lonesome. She said her brother who was in Alaska, told her how he had been snubbed in his travels + wanted her to treat the boys good because he knew how he felt. She is the most thoughtful girl you ever saw. You couldn't even buy her a coco cola. She lives over a delicatessen which her father operates. Besides that, her mother is a paralytic. She does all

the home cooking + housework, in addition to waiting on her mother. She is editor of the college newspaper + has to work hard, too.

I used to play Ping-Pong with her, on every open post. She said that she did not like to let servicemen fall all over her; but she liked to see them enjoy themselves. With me never knowing what to do, we got along pretty well. When I left, I told her I'd probably never see her again; but, she wanted to write to me. So, she has sent several letters to me, including one with a picture. I finally got around to answering her, last Sunday. But I only tell her what I tell you, in effect, what's going on here, that's all.

At any rate I often think, in church, of how I hope that no girl ever attracts my attentions, 'til after the war. Because I want to be thinking only of you, Ma + Betty + coming back home. Well, enough of the baloney. We are supposed to get an open-post tomorrow night. This has been cancelled, because we have been sloppy + "goofing" as a squadron. Nobody cares about marching or inspection or anything. You see, everybody has the attitude of having had 5 months of dirt which was not in the enlistment contract. You understand I guess. We'll never get off the confines of "gruesome gables," while we're here, to do details, etc. All I want is to get started on training.

Here's that girl's picture. You can send it back if you so please, to me. But, don't worry about it. She just happens to be a very thoughtful + wholesome girl. (7/20/43)

Despite the young man's stated disavowal of girls, he managed to befriend one near every base he was assigned to. He was attracted by sensible, intelligent, and virtuous young women. Perhaps the renunciation was more for Ma's and Betty's consumption than an accurate portrayal of his feelings. The subject of ladies found periodic place in his letters. While he did not *fall* for any of them, he kept his options open.

On the evening of July 20, George and twenty of his buddies from the Grove City bunch went to an Italian restaurant in Nashville. Afterward, the group split up as some went out sight-seeing while others went drinking. George and his companions wound up at

the YMCA where he found his favorite diversions: swimming and ice-cream. He summed up his feelings about the city:

> There really is not too much to do in Nashville, unless you're looking for trouble. (7/22/43a)

After more fretting about the grinding suspense of waiting for classification, the break finally came on July 22. The notice immediately catapulted him to the highest point he had been to since joining the army.

The news which may shape my destiny

> Here is the news which may shape my destiny for the next few years or maybe my whole life, Ma & Betty. I just saw, 5 minutes ago, a special order on the bulletin board, which contained a list of some 50 names who had qualified for Pilot Training. Yes, I'm going to be a pilot, believe it or not. The order read something like this: "The faculty board on consideration of qualifications + also quotas to be filled has recommended the following for Pilot Training." There, you have it!
>
> You understand how important this is, I suppose. It means that my objective is now in view, be it ever so far away, for the first time. Pilot training is 9 months, once you leave Nashville, as follows:

1. Pre-flight school	-	9 weeks
2. Primary flying school	-	9"
3. Basic " "	-	9"
4. Advanced " "	-	9"
	Total	36"

> That means that if I can survive the struggle, in which 70% of all pilot trainees wash out, before they get commissioned, I will get a pair of wings about April 1st. This is all a brief forecast of what lies ahead, you see.

I will get a B.T.O. hat

> My next post will, most likely, be Maxwell Field, Alabama. Furthermore, being appointed a cadet means that in a day or two, I will

be issued some additional clothing – 2 or 3 suits of suntans, low-cut shoes, athletic equipment, etc. Also I will get a "B.T.O." hat (a big time operator cap with a pair of wings on it).

Being appointed for pilot training almost eliminates any chance for getting a furlough. So, don't be disappointed. But, you can bet that if I miss a shipment, for any reason, I'll almost go A.W.O.L, instead of hanging around here.

Well, folks, can you imagine, I'm actually going to be an aviation cadet. When I enlisted, I figured I had agreed to that. But, since I have been in the army, they have laughed at us for even thinking that we would become one. The term "air cadet" has become almost a fable or a myth, in my mind. Now, I'm actually looking forward to it (yes, it's still ahead). For, we officially become cadets on the day when we ship out of here. Until then, I still rank below the lowest private + army prisoners, as an "aviation student." An air cadet ranks between a Sgt. and a warrant officer. More of that later, though. I'm a bit excited now. You see, I've thought of this classification since the day I enlisted. (7/22/43b)

Ecstatic over his classification, Neilson lamented the disappointment of the boys that washed out and were relegated to Jefferson Barracks, which he referred to as "a real hell hole where a washed out cadet is a bum." Conceding that the high demand for pilots versus other spots was a strong factor in his being selected, he mentioned a number of acquaintances who had been assigned as navigators and bombardiers. George's confidence poured out in his letter following the appointment.

With an objective in mind, I can take it all

Well folks, I'm writing as if I had accomplished something. Perhaps I have not. The real job is just beginning. The real work + real dirt to be taken with a smile is only starting. But, you watch, with an objective in mind, I can take it all, + I will. I'll do my best, every minute, once I leave this &-#*-X post. I have never missed anything yet, + I don't intend to. I'll try + exert my initiative, now + try to become a leader. Many boys

have wasted their talents + so on, in being lieutenants, etc. in these pre-pre-pre-cadet days.

I have just come in from drilling for ¾ hour. That was a penalty to our squadron, for "goofing off" + not reporting for formations, sleeping under barracks, going to the restaurants, etc. They want to keep us "on the ball" in this hole, if you please. The boys say "nothing cookin'." They threaten the boys with washing out, etc. But, we still saunter along, in formation. I'm telling you that it gets real hot down here. We have to stand for ½ hour in the sun, for each chow line. It makes you feel like a pig, waiting for the others to crowd into the pen.

By the way, we go to the theatre, most of every day, to see the films which all of us have seen on "Prelude to War" + to listen to lectures on "Articles of War" just to keep us out of mischief. It's awful boring. Everybody in the camp could repeat everything verbatim; but, they have to give the officers something to do. They even realize that we all have had the whole thing at basic training + again at the *C.T.D.

The officers appeal to our sympathy for their being stationed here too

When we complain about conditions here, the officers appeal to our sympathy for their being stationed here, too. This is a poor sight, this camp! You needn't wonder why they don't want us taking pictures of this place. It would be embarrassing to the Air Corps alongside of Randolph Field, Kelly Field, + all the glamorized airfields.

I guess I never mentioned all the planes (mostly Liberators + P-51s) which soar over our yawning eyes, all day from nearby Smyrna Air base. It is a transition school, where graduates of flying learn to fly the real things.

The next thing should be "Cadet Process" (getting the uniforms, etc.) I really feel relieved in that I know where my objective is. I also know that I'm at the bottom of the ladder. With that, I'll sigh with relief, + sign off for tonight. (7/22/43b)

*C.T.D. – College Training Detachment

The final days of *The Battle of Nashville* were spent getting uniforms, signing acceptance papers, and a few other last minute

procedures. George met with a lieutenant for an exit interview. The young officer congratulated him for qualifying as a pilot and gave him some advice, assuring him that his classification was no accident but well deserved. He said the tests had proven to be very accurate. George responded that the lieutenant's confidence would not be in vain. The out-processing was an assembly-line type equipment and clothing issue reminiscent of the reception station at Atlantic City. Some items were collected while a full complement of military outfitting was issued. George was treated very well. To the young man, it seemed like a turning point in his own personal war.

Then, I went through the various booths where I got personal fits on everything. They want to make sure that you are properly dressed + fitted in every item of clothing. They allow you to take plenty of time in doing so, too. So, it appears that the army is beginning to give us a little attention. At least, it appears that way, when they put us through this type of procedure. (7/24/43)

George made an exhaustive list of the gear he received, but was most proud of number fourteen on the list.

14. Last but not least, I got my beautiful, richly tailored cadet hat upon which are fixed gold wings + propeller with a 3 inch span. You should see it, it must be worth plenty of money. Wait 'til you see a picture of it. I will only wear it when I have to, because it is hot + heavy. It is olive-drab + looks something like an officer's hat. However, it is a part of the official dress uniform for cadets, along with suntans.

Boy! I felt a little like something as I paraded back to the squadron area for dinner. They brought my barrack bag up in the truck, later. (7/24/43)

The final challenge at Nashville was to deal with the drudgery of waiting for shipment. As always, rumors flew about when that would occur.

Furloughgrams

I sure hope that we don't have to bear the brunt of details which lie ahead for all cadets, who await shipment. You see, that is what provokes people to send those "furloughgrams" which I described to you, to their sons here. They probably pay the price of missing a month's shipment if they do get out. So, I'll have to wait. But the "Battle of Nashville" is not yet over, so, we'll see. I think that a delayed, honest furlough would be better than a dishonest one, now.

So, that's it, to this minute. I have derived all the possible gains from this post + I want to get out as soon as I can, as you might imagine. I have marked all my new issue + neatly packed my underwear, socks, etc. into the barrack bag. I sent my new suntans to the tailor, to have them shortened. I had to get a large size, to fit my large behind, you see. (7/24/43)

Before leaving Nashville, there was one last piece of unfinished business that George and the boys needed to attend to. This was to be beyond the gaze of the officers.

Ted Perkins would pay for it if we ever got him fair and square

Guess who walked in? It was the no good bum who instigated the hazing at Grove City. His name was *Ted Perkins, a simpleton + a know-it-all, who had had a few years of C.M.T.C., prior to coming into the Air Corps. So, up there he proceeded to dictate to the officers as to just what should be done, in hazing, etc. Remember how I told you that it was being carried out by ignorant, back-woods hicks from Maine, who never had taken it before? It was all because the inexperienced officers at Grove City, knew no better than to let him run the show. So we were doing unreasonable things for those 4 weeks. All the time, we threatened that Ted Perkins would pay for it if we ever got him fair + square. Well, he shipped out of Grove City, with the 1st group, on May 10th. And, he's still here. He is finally ready to ship, now. But he worked out a furlough, went back to Grove City, where he had set himself up as an idol, being group commander, (in his own mind, only) + got himself engaged to a local girl.

So he walked-in last night, expecting us to give a rising cheer for him. Well, we started in, in a joking way, needling him + ribbing him about how much of a poor soldier + cheap skate he had proven to be. He

denied all accusations + the din grew into a roar; then we became a bit more excited + told him how lucky he was to get out of there, alive. Still, he took it in a suave assured manner. Finally, we asked him if he did not wish to wash away the sins he had committed against squadron B. Of course, he pleaded 'nolo' to this. So, we told him he had some to wash away. With that, 5 of us picked him up, lugged him out + put him into a dirty shower, in the rear of the latrine, clothes + all (fatigues). We then dropped him into the mire + muck + walked away. There was no commotion; but, I don't think we'll ever hear Ted Perkins shoot his mouth off again. He is an example of a cheap bum who thought he was a big-shot + made intelligent boys suffer for it. I know he won't last when he gets to pre-flight. It'll be too bad if he ships with anyone who knows him. He'll get strung-up, some night. That's something interesting on how you get even, huh?

Tonight, I am still lolling around writing letters to Aunt Kate + to you. That brings me up to the minute. I hope that soon I will be shipped from this freight yard which is going, night + day, making + breaking freight trains. The racket goes on 24 hours a day. (7/25/43)
*pseudo name

On Monday, July 26, rain poured from the sky over eastern Tennessee, relieving a drought. George and his cohorts were told to have their bags packed and ready to ship by 7:30 the next morning. He had been paid, which was a requirement before transferring to another base. Near the end of the remaining part of his last letter, he wrote to Ma and Betty:

I'd like to remind you or at least call your attention to the fact that I have sent, with this letter, two little, gold pairs of wings, one for you + one for Betty, which you can wear on your lapels. They represent only an effort to show you that I am always thinking of you. I hope you can wear them. Tell me if you get them, will you? (7/26/43)

The next morning, *Aviation Cadet* George H. Neilson left for Montgomery, Alabama. "The Battle of Nashville" was won.

Chapter 7

Preflight Training

Maxwell Field
Montgomery, Alabama

The Air War in Europe

From the time of the mass evacuation of the British Army from Dunkirk in June 1940 until July 1943, no Allied ground armies operated in Europe. The USAAF and RAF were the only Allied fighting forces deployed in Axis-occupied territory, with the exception of paramilitary underground guerilla fighters called partisans.

World War II was the first major conflict when air power was a decisive factor in determining the outcome. Aerial bombardment was in its infancy during the First World War, and much of it was accomplished by zeppelin and balloon. Military aviation, at least until 1916, was distinguished more by a few aces who racked up impressive numbers of "kills" in dogfights than by sustained air campaigns. Pilots were the subject of legends, like Manfred von Richthofen, the Red Baron of Germany, and America's own Billy Mitchell. At first making its mark as a means of battlefield reconnaissance, aviation became more of a factor in the shifting tides of war as larger squadrons were organized, such as the German Jagdestaffeln (Flying Circuses). By the end of the war in 1918, the Americans had 750 planes, about 10 percent of the Allied war effort.[1] But in the final analysis, the Great War (as it was known prior to the Second World War) was fought mainly by massed armies on the ground.

The fledgling Army Air Service, the precursor to the *US Army Air Corps, did produce some of the prophets of air power's future. Billy Mitchell was the first American airman to fly over enemy

lines on the western front and fully appreciate the destructive potential of bomber warfare. His idea was to use airplanes to strike the Germans behind their lines, destroying airfields and supply resources. Airplanes could carry the war to the enemy's economy without the bloody struggles of massed infantry units for a few yards of ground.[2]

In the view of Italian air commander and theorist Gen. Giulo Douhet, the future of air power was not dogfights but bombing. Douhet[3] wrote:

> The main targets would be the enemy's key industrial cities, not its armies in the field. Attacks on these vital centers would shatter civilian morale, destroy the enemy's war-making capability, and produce a mercifully quick capitulation, without the need for either armies or navies.

Britain's Air Marshal Hugh Trenchard, the Royal Air Force's founding father, was a believer in bomber warfare and influenced his US counterparts Billy Mitchell and Henry H. "Hap" Arnold, who became convinced that, like the British, America needed an independent air force. This thinking was ahead of the technology, for in the early thirties, there was no aircraft in existence that had the range to fly from the homeland to a distant enemy target and return safely. Furthermore, Americans during the First World War were reticent on humanitarian grounds to support indiscriminate bombing of civilian targets, much less noncombatant populations. That changed in the last desperate months of World War II in Europe when the Yanks groped for anything that would bring down the stubborn Nazi fanatics.[4] The "total war" of late 1944–45, unleashed in the quest to prevent "endless war," resulted in more death and destruction than in the previous five years of fighting.

Strategic vs. Area Bombing

When World War II broke out, the Royal Air Force was far ahead of the USAAC (*United States Army Air Corps) in its war

footing. It wasn't until August 1942 that the US Eighth Air Force began combat operations out of England. The Eighth had been established at Savannah Army Air Base in Georgia in the month after Pearl Harbor to become one of the first offensive forces to strike against Nazi Germany. Under the able leadership of Gen. Ira C. Eaker, the US bomber czar for Europe, its philosophy of air war differed from that of the British. The British were convinced that "area bombing" of large cities under cover of night was the only way to prevent huge losses, but the price of this relative safety was a very low rate of target strikes. In contrast, the US planners believed that the only way for bombardment to be effective was flying by daylight at high altitude, striking the enemy's war-making capability.[5] This "strategic bombing" aimed to cripple armaments factories, oil refineries, communications infrastructure, military bases, and rail marshaling yards. Railroad networks were central to moving the enemy's men and material to the battlefronts, and all other aspects of the war economy depended on them. Though the British and American strategies were quite different and never did merge, the combination of British night bombing and US daytime bombing realized the goal of never letting the sun set on the terror the Allies rained down on the German Reich for over one thousand days. This was longer than any other major campaign of the war.

One key factor in the contribution of the USAAF in the European war was the highly secret Norden bombsight that enabled the bombardiers to strike targets on the ground with enhanced accuracy. The Norden was referred to by Miller[6] as "America's most important secret weapon before the Manhattan Project." Another was the production of massive four-engine aircraft. The B-17 and its cousin, the B-24, were colossal killing machines and were the first aircraft that could carry enough fuel to fly from England to the heart of Nazi Germany and back. These ten-man bombers' range extended far beyond that of the fighters that protected them, so it had to make much of the long journey to its targets and back without fighter support. A round-trip mission

from East Anglia to deep inside the German Reich and return could take over eight hours.

The Allies Were Losing

Miller[7] described the Allied situation in February 1942, when the American contingent that was to assemble the Eighth Air Force landed in London:

> The German Blitz, eight months of fire and fear in 1940 and '41, had killed some 30,000 Londoners and left another 50,000 injured. And on far fronts, the war was going disastrously for the Allies. In Libya, British forces had been soundly defeated by Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's desert army; in Russia, the Red Army had been pushed back to Moscow and Leningrad; and in the Philippines, a starving, under-manned American force under Lt. Gen. Douglas C. MacArthur was making its final stand in the mountain jungles of Bataan. On February 15, five days before Eaker arrived in London, Singapore, the bastion of Occidental power in the Far East, fell to the Japanese. For Britain, these were the darkest months of the war.

Despite the technological breakthroughs that produced the Norden bombsight, radar, and long-range bombers, until 1944 the Allies were losing the air war in Europe. Losses were staggering. An American or British bomber crewman stood only a one-in-five chance of surviving his twenty-five-mission tour. In a single air raid on the North Sea port of Bremen on October 8, 1943, thirty "Forts" were lost, along with their three hundred crewmen.[8] The next day, the thirteen crews of the Hundredth Bomb Group (known as the Bloody Hundredth) flew out of its Thorpe Abbots base in East Anglia northeast of London to attack the German city of Muenster. Only one plane returned.[9] It was with this dismal backdrop that Air Cadet George H. Neilson, twenty-one years old,

embarked upon a twenty-month training process to prepare him to join the fight.
*On June 20, 1941, the USAAC became the US Army Air Forces (USAAF).

TRAINING STAGE IV-- PRE-FLIGHT SCHOOL, MAXWELL FIELD, MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA

It was natural to desire to escape the primitive conditions at Nashville. So, it was a welcome sight to be able to hop on the train—for anywhere. As was usually the case, the train was not destined to take us to the East, and closer to home. It was a hot, muggy day in early July, and the train was to take me further away. Being away from home and going further away was always a heavy weight of daily psychological burden, in those days, bearing in mind that the trip into the service represented the first significant trip away from home.

It was a rough, dirty, smoke-filled railroad car. [The] train took us, via the Louisville & Nashville Railroad, to Montgomery, Alabama, where Maxwell Field is a permanent Air Force Base at this time serving as a pre-flight school for the Eastern Flying Training Command. The train was the "choo-choo" variety of the steam train period. The typical comment relating to the train trips between duty stations was that the cars appeared to be the same cars that Abraham Lincoln rode in, 80 years earlier, en route to Gettysburg. Their quality and status of upkeep gave testimony to this supposed fact.

Maxwell Field was an uplifting experience in terms of being "eager" and "on-the-ball." When we were greeted there, we ran between locations, initially, to the mess-hall, barracks, etc. The training personnel at the base made great efforts to gear us up, physically and mentally.

The pre-flight training was a 13 week course, very fast-moving and replete with military drilling: parades, classroom curricula, physical fitness programs, etc. The classroom training was designed to orient us to aviation subjects, such as navigation,

aircraft recognition, engine mechanics, and of course, the famous "Why We Fight" series of films that we saw many times as the powers-that-be tried to orient us to the war. Amongst other factors of "being on the ball," we were required to keep our uniforms neat and pressed, as the impression of pilots being military leaders and "gentlemen" was initiated into our thinking.

Maxwell Field was a permanent base and the buildings were substantial and attractive. The general atmosphere stimulated us to begin to realize that the Air Corps, and its training, was vital and important. The food was good, and I began to lose track of being away from home, at least it did not seem vital each and every day.

One of the important factors in my ability to adapt to service life, as well as to endure the insecurities and inconveniences, was the fact that I wrote a letter home to my mother, every day, during the entire time that I was in the service. No matter what the pressure of the time and daily condition of life, I managed to get some sort of a letter off to my mother. While I was anxious to let her know how I was doing, etc., I came to realize that writing was providing me with a daily source of stability and perspective as well as a chance to reminisce with the values at home, which was difficult to find in the service.

There were two major highlights of the time at Maxwell Field, which seem to be worth relating. One, the physical training program was very extensive, demanding that you reach out, beyond yourself to attain the goals established by the training officers. One of the most memorable features of the program was the "Burma Road" (named after the very difficult supply routes used to keep our troops going in the C.B.I. – China-Burma-India Theater). The Burma Road was a cross-country course, through a forest, over streams and hurdles. It took one hour, and, we traversed it three times each week. It left the trainees, usually, well-drained of energy and exhausted from having accomplished it (herded on the instructors) in the heat of the summer Alabama sun. Generally, the P.T. instructors would goad you, if you slacked off or were not up to what they perceived as the desired pace. The physical capacity was moved up to a higher level of performance

than I had ever experienced. In addition, I felt better, overall, than I had ever felt. It was an important step in getting prepared for the grueling experiences that were to follow.

The other significant experience was realized through the highly-disciplined military-drill program that embraced some part of each day, at Maxwell Field. We were organized into squadrons and groups, for the purpose of marching everywhere we had to go on the base. Soon after our arrival, volunteers were recruited from the body of the cadet trainees, to serve as leaders—group commanders, squadron-leaders, etc. These were trainees, like myself, typically either those with training at military schools or those who felt that being a military leader would be the key to success in flying. These fellows surfaced as the leaders of our "corps" of trainees. As matters developed, they took advantage of their situation as cadet-officers and actually participated in disciplinary actions against their own fellow-trainees, with the guidance and direction of the actual training officers. This was accomplished for minor, and sometimes major, infringements. The power-of-command visibility of these student officers often became overwhelming to the degree that a typical trainee lived in fear of these student-officers. Usually, an average trainee, like myself, sort of envied the military bearing of these student officers. From that, it was normal to gain the impression that these fellows would be the ones who would be successful in the vital aspects of learning to fly and then moving on to leadership in the Air Corps. The interesting part of this was that, later, these "student officers" seemed to falter, thus to be washed-out of the Air Corps training, due to their inability to perform and meet the standards of the mechanical and psychological skills of piloting. It seems that they had to project their "military" skills as a crutch they hoped would bridge the gap of their feelings of insecurity in learning to fly airplanes. Later, numbers of these former "student officers" who did advance in training seemed to have problems in combat-flying. It was noted that some were lost.

In summary, the exercise in living in fear of trainee-type student officers, eventually provided the realization that these

fellows had opted for positions in the military aspects of things because they hoped their performance in these ways would bridge the mental-block they held concerning their abilities to learn flying. It was a good lesson to learn.

As a footnote to the pre-flight training at Maxwell Field, it was noticed that a few of our fellow-trainees began to be concerned that this training was getting them closer to war-time action. They began to seek out and emphasize physical limitations and disorders, for which they sought medical attention. Such things as hernias and other difficult-to-pin-down ailments became issues. Some made vehement complaints—all for the purpose of being assigned to a duty that would not be as dangerous as flying. It worked, for a few of them. (G.H.N., 1991)[10]

Leadership is a precarious thing. It is a fairly natural tendency of people who get a little power to abuse it, unless they truly understand that real power comes not from rank but from one's ability to gain respect, be humble, and lead by example. In truth, people are driven more by their allegiance to a cause or a mission they believe in than by intimidation. A good leader instills in those he or she leads a commitment to that mission so that they will drive themselves.

The Air Corps Tactical School

"The Air Corps Tactical School at Maxwell Field in Montgomery, Alabama was the first professional school for aviators and aviation planners in the world," stated Donald Miller, "and it became a nurturing center for the newest thinking about strategic bombing."[11] The men who were selected as pilots and other key positions in the air corps were sent to Maxwell Field more to become elite military officers than to be trained to fly and fight. The base could be thought of as the West Point of the South. Although there were elements of officer decorum training at the CTD (College Training Detachment) at Grove City, it was the Little League compared to what occurred at Maxwell Field.

Dressed in suntans, George and his compatriots (many of whom had also been with him at CTD) shipped to Montgomery in a dirty, dusty old train powered by steam locomotive.

We got on the old train of day coaches, in Nashville, at 10:45 p.m. last night. It was hot + muggy + almost every seat in each of the 14 cars on our train was filled. As soon as we got onto the train, we all put on our fatigues in order to be as comfortable + practical as possible. You can't imagine how much of a nightmare every one of these train rides is. Hot, filthy, + in the most uncomfortable, old coaches that the railroads can dig up. Each one has been the same, so far. You can imagine us trying to sleep all cramped into a coach with the temperature about 100 degrees. Well, we tried ripping up the chairs + making beds out of them, as usual. But, everyone was so groggy that we all were unconscious most of the way. You know, one way of measuring what being in the army this while does for you is the way some of us felt on the train, last night. We were all laughing + joking about how impossible it was to breathe, let alone sleep. I slept from 2:00 a.m. until 7:30 a.m., on the dirty floor of the car. I'll bet draftees aren't even subjected to some of the rigors which they throw at us.

By the way, they handled our bags, for us, completely, at Nashville. We didn't have to carry them an inch. However, they did lie out on the field during a ½ hour deluge, at supper time; so nobody knows what they will look like, now. (7/28/43a)

Though these are not exactly war stories, they are stories never to be forgotten. These men were being seasoned in a thousand ways to fight the most dangerous man in the world and his legions. Some of the seasoning was intentional, some just a result of the expediency of a national emergency. No one planned it that way; it was just the best that could be done in time of war.

The trip to Maxwell Field afforded George a unique glance into the injustice of Southern society.

The first thing I knew this morning we were in Birmingham, Alabama. From there, I sat up the remaining 100 miles, which took

about 3 ½ hours. I don't remember anything, before Birmingham; but all we saw from Birmingham to Montgomery was decrepit towns, scattered through the very uninteresting landscape, as in Kentucky and Tennessee, in shacks that are worse than Teague's chicken coops. Another thing which I noticed was that all along the way, you'd see Negroes tilling the soil or working on lumber piles or freight yards, while you could only see whites standing around talking or loafing. I guess white people don't even lift a hand.

We arrived at this post at 10:30 this morning. It lies 4 or 5 miles outside of the drab city of Montgomery, capitol of Alabama. As we got off the train, we stepped onto an elaborate physical training field. We were told to line-up on the double by cadet student officers. (7/28/43a)

George's impressions of Maxwell Field were a mixed bag. He liked the military culture of the place: the discipline, the physical training, the spit and polish. The facilities were strikingly modern compared to the classification center. He was astonished at how the cadets were waited on in the mess hall by servants, but there were still moments of harassment and abuse by cadet officers.

This is the real thing

I think this training is going to be exacting; but I believe that the manners, etc. which they forced on us at Grove City, will be a help, because I notice that all these manners, etc. must be complied with, at meals. When you finish eating, you must sit at attention, with the hands on the knees. It looks very impressive, in the long lines of tables. Then, the squadron leaves the hall, in formation, rising, turning + marching out, in formation. You know that, here, we don't even pick our plates off the tables when we are finished, just leave them for colored waiters.

There is a public address system in every room, throughout the post, so, an officer can find a man or speak to every man on the post, at one time, at any moment.

You can tell that things are properly laid out, down here. They have booklets + pamphlets, to cover any question which might be in our minds. Our official program, which will dwell on discipline for aeronautics,

physical training + military courtesies does not start until Monday. Our squadron officer is Lieutenant Nielsen. He is young + appeared methodical as he outlined our training. We'll have to be at attention at all times, fall out on the double, snap-to when officers come into the rooms, etc., like Grove City only this is the real thing, for which Grove City was the practice. It is part of the cadet system which is used at West Point. I get quite a kick out of the way they wait on us at mess. Then, you should see the boys march to + from formations. (7/28/43b)

Fundamentally, this school is supposed to build us up physically, for flying, + to give us a few ground courses in aeronautics. Discipline + military formalities are equally as important. I understand we'll have to run 6 + 8 miles at a crack, here. This is supposed to correspond with Chapel Hill, No. Carolina for the naval fliers. The difference is that we will not get football. I understand that the naval fliers have had to go through the pre-cadet training that we had. So, there's some consolation.

These pre-training days are being used to get our patches on, + our uniforms ready, pressed, etc. for the ordeal. They say that we will never have a second to ourselves, here. Tonight, I had a haircut that would make a "G.I" cut look silly. Boy, they took almost all of it off. We will not have to get another though. It is so we will all be uniform, to start with. This is the first time that I ever had two haircuts in 4 days. (7/29/43)

I guess we are here to see if we can take it

I have, here a *souvenir book with pictures of the entire set-up, here at Maxwell Field. You may read it, when you get it, + discount all you see about flying. That applies to when they had elementary flying, etc. here. Now, it is an advanced base for big bombers + they are working 24 hours a day, to expand the facilities of the air base. That lies to the west of the pre-flight barracks. Being strictly confined as we are I have not yet seen the flying field. I do not suppose that I will get to see it much, either. That is not why we are here. I guess we are here to see if we can take it. But, that remains to be seen.

Anyhow they have smothered us with booklets, + codes of honor, cadet regulations + all sorts of mimeographed material, which we will

be held responsible for learning + we will receive demerits if we do not conform to all the letters of all the laws. Every few minutes, these days, an upperclassman walks in + tells us about one or two new regulations. We just don't know where we are at. We have to have our beds in intricate + specific order, an altogether original style, every item of clothing + furniture must be arranged in its position + everything must be so, or we'll be getting demerits. 5 demerits, each week, are "free." After 5, you get a tour for each demerit up to 10. Tours are walked in the squadron area on open post nights + on Sundays. For that, they wear dress uniforms, white gloves + walk strictly at attention. I can see that this will be no fun in this torrid heat; all you do is sweat, all day.

Well, I'm trying to get nerved up to the routine; but I suppose I'll only get going when they start bearing down on us. I've been in a state of relaxation, physically, since the last week of Grove City. You see there was no routine or inspiration at Nashville, to keep you going. I think I'm in need of some of those physical workouts, which we had at Grove City. So, I'm really anxious to get in the swing of things.

Keep your cup at 1 o'clock, bowl at 9 o'clock

Boy, I've got to practice standing + sitting at attention. They march up+ down behind you in the mess hall, to see that you sit perfectly erect, keep your knife across the edge of the plate, keep your cup at 1 o'clock, bowl at 9 o'clock, etc. The mess hall is an impressive site, with everybody sitting at attention. There seems to be hundreds of colored people waiting on us. They jump, as soon as a hand goes up. They all wear white gloves + dress neatly, too.

The place is run efficiently + strict. The main idea of everything will be to teach us the importance of doing what we are told, for later use. The beds being made a certain way, etc., is pointless, they told us. But we have to learn to do things, no matter how pointless, as long as they are orders.

Classes start on Monday....In the meantime we will have to get up at 4:00 a.m., to do what is necessary for "A.M.I." (a.m. inspection). Tomorrow, we will have our first daily "A.M.I." Thereafter, we'll have an "A.M.I. + a "P.M.I.," each day. Then on Saturdays, we'll have a "white glove" S.M.I. (Saturday morning inspection), which is a real one, I guess.

"My class 44-D" will follow me all through my training, unless I miss some time, somehow. (7/30/43)
*The souvenir *book*, *Preflight 44D*[12] was included in George's military scrapbook.

George portrayed his new base as the country club of the army. This hybrid of Southern hospitality and strict military discipline stood in stark contrast to the negative experiences at Nashville and Atlantic City. He is gaining a sense of identity and pride in the organization.

It felt good to get dressed up and act like gentlemen

Last night, the cadet orchestra played. There was no girls or guests, since the affair was entirely for those on quarantine. Thus, there was no dance. The place has the atmosphere of a nightclub in spots, + of a large club like the University Club, in other places. There are also bowling alleys, down below. It is truly pleasant. There are a large number of colored boys swarming around after you, cleaning up dirt + straightening out things.

Listen to this, out on either side of the dancing pavilion they had at least 100 Coca-Cola machines—packed with ice, Coca-Cola, + Sealtest ice cream. Each machine was manned by a colored man who did nothing but hand out as many cokes + large cups of ice cream as you could eat. Besides that, they had 5 Coca-Cola trucks + 2 ice-cream trucks, backed up in the rear of the pavilion. They kept filling the boxes with this nice ice cream. They also had chocolate coated peanuts. I never saw anything like that before. I don't know how often they will do this. But, it felt good to get dressed up and act like gentlemen in the midst of [a] wonderful atmosphere. (8/1/43)

I got a long letter from Junior, too, who expressed his congratulations at my appointment, telling me that he knew I would get pilot, just as Bob did. Bob used the exact same words as Junior, in this regard. I hope it's true. I'll do my best. (8/3/43)

George passed on to Ma and Betty tidbits of news on his former friends and associates who had written to him. These provide interesting insights into the story of a generation of young men in a nation marshaled for war.

I got a letter from Mattera, the Revere + B.C. boy, who was with me at Nashville + Grove City. He is a bombardier. Consequently, he has a wart in store for him. However, his training is only 21 weeks, when it does start. In the meantime, he is pulling details (K.P., guard duty, etc.). He is working on a "furloughgram," also.

I got two other letters from boys with whom I went to school + have been writing to. One, Frank Merlina, the boy who rode with me to the junior prom, from East Boston, is a sergeant, gunner, in combat training at a base in Montana. He has wings. He flies in a B-17 fortress, + handles the guns. He was thinking of getting into this training. But, he is with such nice fliers, he [is] now undecided. Another, Bernie Freedman, a nice Jew boy, is in an aircraft armorer's job at a base in Utah. He loads bombs onto the planes. His crew will go across in November.

They have given us many new pamphlets to help us learn to recognize at split second intervals, all types of airplanes. We were out on the airfield for P.T. today. We saw a lot of Liberators [B-24's]. (8/3/43)

A Long, Hot Summer

Cadet Neilson suffered in the torrid heat of an Alabama summer. He seemed oblivious to the fact that becoming a flier at the time was tantamount to suicide. Life for the young cadet centered less on the war than on the here and now. As his program at Maxwell Field went on, it seemed to be a relentless round of physical fitness training, classroom work, parading, inspections, and weekend "open posts." Even the open posts were frustrating, as wartime Montgomery was packed with soldiers on weekends seeking a meal, a beer, and a good time. The eateries were thronged with men, and waits were agonizing, consuming precious hours of a soldier's free time. The typical GI had a voracious appetite for

wine, women, and song. George became annoyed by the carnal appetites of these men, finding them to be unpleasant company. Clearly he had little interest in wasting his life in carousing. He found a few companions to spend time with on weekend jaunts into Montgomery, a city he detested. He longed for home, decent company, and the chance to get in the cockpit of an aircraft again. He frequently assured his mother that he did not want to waste his time or emotional well-being on girls yet confessed on occasion that he wished he did have a girlfriend.

The USO imported busloads of females, ostensibly from local colleges, for their weekend dances on post. George talked to a few but admitted that he was not much of a ladies' man. It was clear from George's letters that he had been brought up to be a New England gentleman. He attended the Catholic Mass most Sundays and pleased his mother and sister by sending accounts of such attendance.

The young Neilson enjoyed a good joke, a good meal, and a good workout. He was a brilliant student, frequently scoring top marks on tests that often pushed the limit of human intellect. For example, he had to identify dozens of US and British aircraft and ships with only one-tenth of a second or less exposure. Many of these were differentiated only by subtle nuances and were presented at various angles. Mathematics was a snap, and military order and procedures came easily to him. He studied code (a slow, painstaking process), physics, and first aid (the same course, over and over). Other cadets would seek him out for tutoring, which he generally obliged. George was ambitious, diligent, and focused. These traits would serve him well as he endured the rigors of the sifting process in which many men washed out as they worked their way through the various stages of training.

You can imagine how much spare time we had!

Every time I look at those V-7 boys (or rather think of them) I go crazy. Some of the boys who went to school with me left for the ninety-day wonder school on May 1. They are all Ensigns, now. Boy!, If I ever get through this, I'll never put myself on the level with them (low level,

I mean). The funny thing is that they think that a navy uniform means more than anything else. That's neither here nor there, though.

Today, we breezed through a real program in 100 degree heat. Here's the story in a nutshell:

4:15 – Up
4:55 – Reveille
5:15 – Chow
7:10 – Cadet Bearing – customs + courtesies
8:10 – Code
9:10 – Plane identification
10:10 – math (more like number work!)
11:15 – Chow
12:15 – Movies on discipline
1:15 – P.T. – that would make Grove City look like a girl scout drill.
2:45 – Drill
4:10 – Lecture on Sanitation + first-aid
5:15 – Supper
7: - 7:15 – Close call

You can imagine how much spare time we had! That's how it'll be, for most of the time, I guess. (8/4/43)

We are treated more like prisoners

Along that line; the men who came into this from enlisted service have remarked on how we are treated more like prisoners, in regard to open post, free time + furloughs. In most branches, you get 3 day passes after being in for only a week or two + furloughs every few months. In this Air Corps, as you may realize, they make us worship a possible Saturday afternoon or evening + Sunday off. Ever since Atlantic City, they have held the threat of demerits over our heads.

Well, the code is coming interestingly. We learn 3 letters at a time. First, we become accustomed to the code of a letter by the repeating sounds on the earphones. Meanwhile, we are learning to transfer code, by writing down a letter each time we hear it. Then, the instructor will give us letters in groups of 5. We will take down all the letters + every once in a while he'll read back a group, that we can check for our own accuracy. Then, in

the other novel course, aircraft identification. We will accumulate 2 new planes, each day, with all the specifications of each + projected pictures of all. Then, at the end of class, we have a drill in recognizing them in 1/5 second time that they are projected on that screen. (8/4/43)

Sweat? That isn't the word

You know, at each meal down here, there is some sort of morale uplift in marching to the dining hall while the drum + bugle corps stands in the intersection of the streets which lead from the squadron areas, + plays. It makes you feel good; and besides that, you really march + at attention, too! That part of it makes you feel good.

Today, at P.T., the instructor, a big lumbering, ex-college football player, took us across the airfield to another athletic area where we did sit-ups, push-ups (30) + other exercises. Sweat? That isn't the word. The salt from your forehead gets into the eyes + you can't see a thing. Then, you lay on the grass or clay-like mud + the grit gets into the open pores + you have a real itch. It's a lot of fun, believe me! (Please don't though).

You should see the variety of planes soaring over our heads, all day at about 100 or 200 or 500 ft. You can almost see the fliers + I'll bet they are laughing at us, too. I wonder, 15,000 times a day, if I ever get up there. They are working like mad on the airfield, night + day, with bulldozers, trucks + concrete mixers. They are enlarging the capacity of the base, so that it will be a bomber base. (8/5/43)

The apparent haste with which the airfield at Maxwell Field was being expanded was consistent with the push to meet the demands of the global war, as U.S. engagement in the Pacific and in Europe increased. George's observation that the base was to specialize in bombers is noteworthy. Bombing, particularly strategic bombing, required large scale, long-range aircraft of which the four-engine B-17 and B-24 were the workhorses.[13]

Everybody on this post is dressed as neat as a pin

The objective of this [identification] course is to be able to recognize U.S. + British airplanes as they are flashed on the screen in all different angles + positions. However, ultimately, we must be able to write the name down with the plane only being in view for 1/10 of a second. That's mighty short time. Today, the officer gave us a few trials at recognizing simply the number of planes in view, with each one being on the screen for 1/5 second. I guess it is a matter of practice + training of the eyes. (8/2/43)

Primarily, the demerit system + the rules, etc. which were used at Grove City is the same as here. So, I'm not at a loss. But, you must be on the ball at all times. They check your shine + fingernails, at every formation, etc. The room has to be spotless + everything must be in its proper place, or demerits result. It can't help but follow that everybody will collect demerits + tours, while we are new here. They intend to see if everyone can take it.

At least all our instructors are commissioned officers. Everybody on this post is dressed as neat as a pin. All the officers set a good example, here. To that extent you don't feel bad about keeping "sharped" up. (8/2/43)

I'm beginning to get back in shape again

This afternoon we went over one of the obstacle courses here. It consists of a row of hand climb bars, a 15 foot ladder, a series of a 6, an 8, a ten, + a 12 ft. wall, also there is a brook or puddle which must be vaulted, + then, you climb a platform + lower yourself to the ground, by means of a rope. This one is 360 yards long + it is a prelude to the "Burma Road," which is now "shelved" because of too many boys getting heat exhaustion. I'm beginning to get back in shape again, now. (8/6/43)

The following tale of an SMI (Saturday Morning Inspection) reveals something of the juxtaposition between precisely groomed cadets in a technically perfect bedroom and the blood and filth of war. Its relevance rests in the molding of disciplined men, capable of following exacting orders, however illogical, which could mean the difference between death and survival in battle.

That inspection which I mentioned that we were preparing for provided a regular nightmare for us all. To begin with, all of us were worrying about just what the inspecting officer would be looking for when he came through, despite the definite + minute details of the instructions. That's the way it usually is, on the occasion. Consequently, the boys in the adjoining barracks were up at 3:00 a.m. on Saturday. But we did not get up 'til 4:15. We still had not done too much towards getting the room ready. However, in the 1 ½ hours at our disposal after breakfast, we worked like mad + cleaned everything up. Fortunately, our room was in good shape + the officers passed through without any adverse comment.

We had to march in our first parade

When last night came up, we all figured that we were going to the recreation hall, directly after supper. Instead, we had to march in our first parade – caps, white gloves + all. The parades down here, really make you feel like marching. It's pretty impressive. The whole of Class 44D which includes all the squadrons which came in with me, was in the parade. That was half the camp or about 4,000. The parade was held just about sunset time, out on one edge of the airport. They had a large colored drum + bugle corps, to provide the music. When we finished, it was just about dusk; and every one was soaked with sweat. But, nobody kicked about it.

This morning we slept late, until 6 o'clock. Then, after breakfast, it was our squadron's turn to go to the hospital for a dental survey. This came at 6:55. They found one of my teeth which needs repairing, yanking or something.

Speaking of such things, about half of all the boys are suffering with a horrid heat rash, probably as a result of the tremendous amount of sweating which we do. It is very uncomfortable and unsightly. It is so hot at night that we all have almost a puddle in the middle of our sheets.

An exhibition of 4 P-47s

At 10 o'clock this morning our whole underclass – ½ the camp went out onto the "line" at the airfield. That is, we all went out + sat down on the main concrete runway, to watch an exhibition by 4 P-47's – Thunderbolts.

These are the newest + fastest pursuit planes. You should see all the bombers lined up on this vast field. It is a tremendous place, all covered with cement runways, which are more like highways. And, they are making the place larger, too. You see, the airfield is now a 4 engine school where graduate pilots learn to fly the "big babies," B-24's. By the way, they start every morning at 3:00 a.m. You should hear the racket when they open up those 4 2,000 h.p. engines on each plane in preparation for taking off. And, they do it one after another, too.

By the way, I got a letter from Owen Carle, who left for the marine training, in June. He is at Quantico, now. I also heard from Red. He told me that the older Hutchinson boy has been at Guadalcanal for 4 months. One of the Serventi boys is in Africa, + Tom Hutchinson's boy is on a naval vessel. He has had many experiences. Meanwhile Red is enjoying the life of "Riley." His younger brother Bill is at Sanford, Maine, in the marines. (8/8/43)

We received a letter from the bombardiers, at Nashville. They expect to be heading for Santa Anna, Cal. or Texas, soon. They say that they are in trouble constantly, in their effort to keep from going mad in those filthy environs. (8/10/43)

Evidently Nashville was the butt of a lot of jokes, some of them funny only in a pathetic sort of way, as George relates this from a letter he received.

Once they were caught by a major, heading for a P.X., after class. They told the major that they were doing two column rights around the block, instead of going to the rear. They tried to make a joke of it, but, it didn't take. One day, they bought up all the cokes in the machines, early in the day. Then, they put them into one of the ice-barrels + had a party at night, along with a tray of cake which someone took from the mess-hall + kept, for such a purpose. So it goes! I don't blame them a bit. The officers go around looking for them, while the boys are following the officers, to keep out of sight. (8/10/43)

The next episode is another of many farcical events which make the trainee uncertain whether to scream, cry, or laugh.

The midnight muster

We were all just about slumbering away last night around midnight. (You see, we go to bed at 9 o'clock; but, it is so hot that it takes 2 or 3 hours to get to sleep.) Well, last night was especially hot, and, the moon was shining brightly. Just at 12:00 one of the upper classmen came around to our rooms + woke us + told us to fall out in 5 minutes. We were told to dress in suntans, cadet caps, + white gloves.

Naturally, we all staggered to our feet and started groping for our clothes, all the while trying to think of a logical reason for it. All the memories of the fire drills + payroll books at Atlantic City came back vividly to mind, but, what kind of a pointless situation had they drummed up this time?

We all got out to the area + fell into our proper places. Nobody said a word; everybody was too much in a fog. We were maneuvered into a platoon formation + then our platoons were massed into close parade formation. It began to look like a parade, no less. In the adjoining areas, we could hear the other squadrons being mustered, in a similar manner. What was it to be?

Finally, in the midst of all the serenity + mystery of the moonlight + the whole situation, somebody started to read off a notice, an official document. It read with somewhat these words:

"The name of *Simon Anderson of squadron No. (whatever it was) was submitted to the cadet board for having been detected as cheating in a physics test, between 7:30 + 8:30 on a certain morning. On the basis of the evidence presented along with the facts, Cadet Anderson was found to be guilty. Consequently, the name of Simon Anderson has been stricken from the roster of the cadet corps + will never be heard again at Maxwell Field...."

That was it! They had gotten the entire cadet corps out of bed at midnight, had them get into parade dress + stand out in the spooky light of the moon while they read the name of a fellow who had been caught cheating + thereby punished. It was really impressive, as I guess it was

intended to be. So we were dismissed + we returned to our rooms, ½ hour after the whole thing began. Chalk up one more experience for the book. It probably will stick in mind for quite a while. (8/11/43)
*pseudo name for the guilty party.

I understand that the affair about the fellow being eliminated, was a cadet tradition of West Point, which is carried on, here. Imagine getting the whole corps up + in dress uniform, just to hear a report of a violation of the cadet honor code. I guess that is something to keep away from. (8/12/43)

He goes on to describe a routine but unique air-raid that occurred frequently that summer.

Well, we just came in from the very impressive parade which took place as a very colorful sunset was taking shape. A thing like that is very good for your spirits after a hot day. Yet, it was really sweltering as the mosquitos and gnats made consistent attacks on our faces, necks + ears. You know about 4,000 cadets, in dress uniform, started out for this parade. On the way back, there was only 4,000 dress uniforms. The men had melted away. (8/12/43)

It is strictly a filthy city and there's nothing nice about it

I must work fast on this one. In order to take advantage of yesterday's open-post privileges, it was necessary for me to beat it back after class, at 5:30, + rush at break neck speed to dress + start to get into town. With all the new class getting its first open post it was a terrific struggle with the intermittent buses jammed to the limit + the waves of taxis which are operated for the purpose, likewise.

Anyhow it took just 1 hr. + 15 minutes to make the 1 ½ mile jaunt into downtown Montgomery. This is just another city, with all the theatres + grills etc. that you ordinarily see. It is strictly a filthy city + there's nothing nice about it. It is so jammed with cadets that you don't stand a chance. We thought that it would be a change to try + eat out. Well, everyone had the same idea. It took us until 8:00 to get to town + get

waited on, in a restaurant. However, I understand that this city is out to "do" the boys. Theatres, taxis, eating places, etc. are all out to make the most of the servicemen. They see the cadets coming + go on the basis that we make $100. a week. That is what Lt. Neilsen told us we would find true.

So, we went to an air-conditioned theatre + saw "Action in the North Atlantic," the story of the convoys + submarines. We had to leave before it was over, in order to be sure + get through the camp gate by 11:00.

Well, it will be interesting to note what happens during P.T. today. It is customary to give the boys a long run or a heavy workout on days which follow open post. It is to discourage drinking. Everybody goes out + gets drunk + sick, especially when they haven't been out for so long like us. If you get sick or fall out during a run, they give you enough demerits to keep you in, in the future. That is, if it was due to drinking. Not only that, they'll eliminate those who persist. Boy! I don't know how the boys figure they can drink the night before these workouts. (8/13/43)

The Battle of the Atlantic

The movie George saw on the night of August 12 was about one of the longest battles of World War II. It became known as the Battle of the Atlantic. The Germans understood that Britain, an island nation, depended on her North American allies for survival and war materiel, especially during the years when Britain was isolated from her European allies that had fallen under German occupation. Western Europe and Great Britain were blockaded by marauding "wolf packs" of German U-Boats (submarines) under Adm. Karl Doenitz. After the occupation of France, the U-boats were harbored along the Bay of Biscay on the west coast of France, from which they would plunder the Allies' trans-Atlantic shipping. The ocean lifeline was needed to pour tanks, fuel, aircraft, supplies, and men into the faltering fronts in Russia and elsewhere. Without this lifeline, the Axis could quickly overrun Great Britain, the last bastion of freedom in Europe, and likely prevail on the eastern front as well.

The sea-lanes of the North Atlantic were treacherous as the U-boats preyed upon shipping and almost succeeded in shutting them down. This great naval confrontation reached its zenith in 1942, as U-boat production soared. Over one thousand ships were sent to the bottom that year, including 116 in November alone. The Germans were fortifying the U-boat pens at Laurient, St. Nazaire, Brest, Bordeaux, and other locations with twenty-five-foot concrete ceilings, making them impenetrable by the bombs of the Eighth Air Force. On October 21, ninety-two heavies bombed Laurient with deadly accuracy, but little was accomplished. A later attack at St. Nazaire wreaked havoc on the pens, but they were rebuilt in a matter of a few weeks.

After 1942, resistance in the shipping lanes waned, but it was a constant struggle to keep these vital waterways open. The Allies eventually prevailed but at a formidable cost in life, ships, and supplies. In May 1943, the Allies sunk forty-one U-boats, more than in the first three years of the war combined. Hunted down by B-24s far out at sea, the wolf packs were then attacked and sunk by lighter aircraft. Doenitz pulled the U-boats from the Atlantic, conceding privately that they had lost the Battle of the Atlantic.[14]

The great Tercentenary Legion Convention

After church, I ate breakfast – nice waffles, fresh pears + cereal – at the mess hall. It was a clear + not too hot [day] (only 85) to start with. Taking advantage of the early a.m. coolness, I went back + slept + relaxed until 11:30 a.m. Then, Randy Martin + 8 more of the Grove City boys + myself made the mistake of starting for Montgomery. But first, picture Montgomery, a town of 65,000 people, with only one large wide street to boast of (+ I suppose they have the nerve to do so.) The capitol lies up on the hill, just like our own capitol, overlooking the main street. On this street there are all the cadets from the following places: 1. Maxwell Field – everyone out on Sunday, 2. Gunter Field – Basic flying school on the other side of Montgomery, 3. Four Engine School – the graduate pilots training, here, on Maxwell. Put all these together + start them going to + fro on the sidewalks + streets + it looks like the end of the great

Tercentenary Legion Convention, in Boston. The town cannot absorb the boys. (8/15/43)

I've seen two Southern capital cities, now, Nashville + Montgomery – they're both disgraceful. They're trying to profit by the soldiers + make it very distasteful. They warned us; so, I suppose we should not be too disgusted. So, that's Montgomery -- give it back to the rebels! (8/15/43)

These violent calisthenics simply knock the boys out

We had calisthenics during P.T. today. That included the obstacle course, too. It is not for repetition, but they carried several boys off the great P.T. area + shipped them to the hospital in the ambulances which they keep there, in wait. It is a common occurrence. The heat is so terrific that these violent calisthenics simply knock the boys out, who are not quite up to par. It happens every day, I guess. But, don't repeat.

In this last week of the math course, we are studying navigation, similar to that which I studied in the night course which I took last year at school. In other words, this course has simply gone over the highlights which will be drilled into us when we start to fly. (8/16/43)

George described his roommates to Ma and Betty, noting the great disparities in life styles and personal values of the men. In encountering such men, he grew in appreciation of the wholesome values and activities his parents provided for him. Although he viewed with great disdain some of the habits of his fellow servicemen, he remarked that they all got along by overlooking the differences in their life-views. Brief excerpts from the biographies of the cadet's roommates follow:

Art Nebel is a nice boy from New York. He attended Centre College in Kentucky as well as Columbia. We got along well at Grove City + understand each other's arguments + points of view, very well. He is a good basketball player. He is short + dark complected. He is 22.

*Harvey Slocum is only 19. He was a freshman from Cornell. He comes from Rochester, where his father is an undertaker in a small town

(Pittsford). He is rather fat, lazy + does not have too much thought of other fellows' capabilities or feelings. He is very smart + a know-it-all (as all college freshmen are). He gets along alright. He is an example of a fellow who volunteered for a student officer's position at Grove City + got himself disliked, completely.

Earl Nelson is a 26 year old, married man from Minneapolis. He came straight from basic training at Keesler Field, to Nashville, where he got in with us. He is a cool acting older man. He was formerly a sales representative for Coca-Cola Company in Minnesota. He is very nice to talk with + he has a cooperative attitude towards this program, although he has been away from the books, for quite a while. We help him with the book work which is so easy for us + a little stiffer for him.

Arthur Nakarado comes from Wakefield, Michigan. He is a boy (of 20) who has been used to much hunting, boating, + rough outdoor life. He is a strong fellow + is well liked. He never went to college; but, he is fairly smart. He has to study a bit more, though. He is understanding to talk to about the outdoor life (as we do long into these sweltering nights), about our own experiences in boating + camping.

Typical of the artificial cooped-up and vile life of the Bronx

Then, there are the two sheeney Kykes, from Brooklyn. *Driesser and *Donavan. They are both typical of the artificial cooped-up + vile life of the Bronx + Flatbush. Drieser has had the advantage of some night-schooling at Brooklyn College. He is a small, not too assuming, yet sheeny looking boy. His philosophy of life is limited by the environment which he has been used to. He cannot appreciate the clean, healthy life at home. He is only used to a girl whom he likes. He has never been anywhere but a theater in New York. He is obstinate enough to believe that in New York, alone, you live + elsewhere you are a hick. He has never had anything, it is obvious; so it is sickening to listen to him talk. We have put him in his place, though, so he looks up to us now. We have talked it into him night after night.

Donavan is a dirty Kyke from Brooklyn who has been used to a vile life, all his years. All he knows is girls, drink, + vice. Nebel and I are disgusted with the likes of him, too. But, we have him know that we

don't live for such ideals as his. Of course he knows it all, having had a helper's job (I presume, although he claims that he was chief engineer) at Grumman Aircraft Company, in Brooklyn. He knows everything, even about boats (which he has never even seen). You should hear him unfold his sense of values on real life + present his appreciation of things. It is almost pitiful, how those people become so distorted in their views. It sure is a lesson, in my own opinion, of what you folks did for us in the way of making us appreciate good things in life. But that is the only reason I am glad that these boys are in the room.

Their base ideals are awful + they are all for themselves, etc. as you can imagine. This being the army, I have learned to get along with everyone; so, we all get along, well as possible, despite our different walks of life. (8/17/43)
*pseudo names

The aircraft George describes in his next letter was the new generation of super bombers after the B-17 and B-24. The B-29 was put into service late in the war, especially in the Pacific theatre. This massive aircraft was the plane that dropped the atomic bombs on Japan in the last days of World War II.[15]

You might be interested to learn that the army is building a plane which will be a supplemental edition of the Flying Fortress. This plane, the B-29, will consist of 4 2,000 h.p. engines + will carry a bomb load of about 25,000 lbs. – 12 ½ tons, including a 4 ton block-buster bomb. These bombs will level all buildings within a ¼ mile radius + kill anyone who is in a ½ mile square area. The plane will have a crew of 10, with about 18 guns. They are also planning to take the bomb bays out of the Fortress and use it as an escort for the bigger planes. Can you imagine using the big fortress as a fighter plane? By the time I get there, they will be flying planes as big as West Medford. The tail surfaces of the B-29 will size about 40 ft. above the ground. (8/18/43)

My neck actually is sore, from so many haircuts

Today, I had a haircut, in preparation for the big inspection tomorrow. It really burns us up to get a 40 cent haircut every 6 or 7 days. My neck actually is sore, from so many haircuts. What a racket? That's part of the game, here, I guess.

We had a 30 plane review of U.S. airplanes, today. We also began studying the British planes, beginning with the "Spitfire." You might like to know that the "Spitfire" is recognized as the greatest fighter plane, yet produced. It is given credit for having saved Britain, during the German onslaught. The later models are yet better than our best, as far as its results are concerned. They are still using Spitfires as protection for our bombers, at high altitudes. It does its best at 30,000 to 40,000 ft. Our Thunderbolt is best at 45,000 ft., 8 miles up. (8/19/43)

For George, writing letters was an important release. He would often write several times during the day, when he had spare moments. Once he got blasted for being up writing at 4:30 a.m. More for companionship than self-indulgence, George went into town on weekends. These sorties frequently included a meal, and ice-cream and a movie. These movies were occasionally comedies but more often war documentaries.

This evening, we are having a dance at the "rec-hall," after parade. They are going to have 20 truckloads of Montgomery girls, for the boys. I guess that means 10 boys to one girl, at best. (8/20-21/43)

I also received a card from Mattera who is at Santa Anna Cal., now, with the 5 other boys from Grove City who were classified as bombardiers. Of course, they are pleased because Santa Anna seems to be the place the boys dream about being sent to. They only train bombardiers, there. But, when you see movies which glorify the Air Corps training, you see the pictures of the field at Santa Anna. The bombardier training is much shorter than the pilot training. (8/23/43)

George had the ability to make a story out of the most mundane of experiences. His letters were replete with human interest, moments when military life faded into the background while life

itself happened. Anecdotes like these are sprinkled throughout the letters home: George underwent a tooth extraction to relieve an abscess while at Maxwell Field. He saw in Montgomery the White House of the Confederacy, the Civil War residence of Confederate president Jefferson Davis. He shared somewhat stingily the wonderful brownies his mother sent him, while more liberally doling out the other contents of his regular care packages. Evidently boys from Massachusetts and those he knew longest tended to be favored more. A thief rifled through the wallets of his cadet class and managed to scour $1,500. George corresponded with Frank Trott and other dignitaries of the Medford Boat Club, keeping a footing in his earlier life on the Mystic Lakes. Behind each such vignette is a wealth of family history and curiosity. While such moments punctuated the young cadet's days, his writing was predominantly and naturally of things military. Here, he describes the high-altitude pressure simulator where the cadets would experience the conditions found near the stratosphere where the big bombers flew.

Finally, at 28,000 feet, he passed out

I went through the high altitude pressure chamber this morning, to chalk up another experience in this never-ending series of events. At 7:00, they took us into the place where they have several chambers, each holding 18 men + a man whose duty it is to watch you, while you're in. Before we went in, they had us peel down to the waist, and, they marked us, all over, with our particular number. Mine was 3. Then, they carefully fitted us to two types of masks, one which we wore "up" + one which we changed to, at 30,000 ft. + wore "down."

First they locked us in (it looks like a submarine, port holes + all) + took us 'up' to 3,000 feet to test our ears, to see whether or not we could clear our ears, in descent. Then they started the 'trip.' There were 18 of us, 9 on each side, with the "instructor" at one end, in the middle. You understand of course, that they did not simulate the high-altitude temperature, during this trip [-50 to -60 F at 30,000 ft.]. Number 13

man, was a volunteer 'guinea pig' to go up until he passed out, to show the other boys what happens. This is the regular routine.

So we started up. The thing is controlled from the outside, by an officer who talks to us, continually, through a microphone + loudspeaker: He is constantly observing through a porthole, + asking different ones to signify their reactions. Going up, we had our masks on, but we did not need to breathe oxygen until we got to 18,000 ft. At 18,000 feet, they gave Charlie Morris [#13] a pad + pencil + told him to write his name + serial number, over + over, while we all watched him. Then, they asked him to add + subtract, orally, to us. He started with 100, then subtracted 7 + added 4, all along, like this: 100-93, 97, 90, 94, 87, etc. As we went up, towards 25,000 feet, he was no longer able to count straight. So, they told him to continue writing his name and number. Finally his writing was reduced to a scribble + then just circles on the paper. Then, he had a silly smirk on his face. At last, (at 27,000 feet or so) they told him to put on his mask or he would pass out. Then, they commanded him + tried to scare him by telling him he would die if he did not. But all he did was sit there + gaze, still trying to write his name. Finally, at 28,000 feet, he passed out + his head fell back. Immediately the instructor slapped his "constant" mask on; and, after 30 seconds of pure oxygen, he recovered completely + immediately began to write his name. It was very funny to watch. The whole idea is to illustrate your uselessness, if you don't use oxygen, + then, it shows that you don't feel anoxia coming on. (8/25/43)

The chamber took them up to 38,000 ft., where gas bloating, abdominal pain, acute inner ear pain, and the bends resulted. The bends is a condition resulting from rapid pressure changes on the body. George described all the procedures needed to deal with upper atmospheric conditions, stating that one day it would only be an incident to "the 1,000 things which you do on a mission." He explained that his intense physical training was crucial to the body being able to meet the excessive demands as a pilot.

In his August 25 letter, George mentioned as a caveat to the rigors of training that he was selected as a sergeant cadet, a role that he had held in derision when other boys held it.

A list of the officers for the squadron came out, tonight. I will be a sergeant it seems. (8/25/43)

Today was "liberator Day" here in Montgomery, in honor of those [B-24] airplanes which they fly here + the job they have done in the various theatres. So, the big "boxcars" were taking off all day long, soaring low, out over the city of Montgomery. The daily paper today, was full of the event, and, it told about some of the young boys whom they are enlisting at the present, how they watch these big planes + say, "This is for me," etc. The same old sales talk. But, wait until they get in? They'll kick themselves all over the lot, for having got into the Air Corps. But, as they told us at Nashville, it's all part of "the plot." Basic Training, Nashville, K.P., Guard duty, New Guinea, Berlin, they used to tell us, it was all part of the same thing. If I ever complete it all, I'll sure have some things, to tell about that. (8/26/43).

Take-offs with the big "babies"

Well, Saturday proved to be just as hot as the preceding days. In the morning, we had an enjoyable 5 mile jaunt around the airport, all around + amidst the new development of the airfield. We had a good close-up view of the pilots practicing landings, + take-offs with the big "babies." They're only beginners as far as those planes are concerned, and they really bounce those planes all over the runways, in their attempt to land. You can hear those 5-foot wide tires screech + scream as they veer along the concrete landing strips. Many of them come across the field, as if they were going to land, then they "give her the gun" + circle around again. These boys are all graduate pilots + they have the same trouble landing these planes that we would have, flying primary trainers. However, I guess that they do not have many accidents which amount to anything.

I sure hope the next 4 weeks don't take too long to go by. I'd sure like to go swimming some place or other or get some enjoyable relaxation. Well, I'll say my prayers (the Miraculous Medal book which I read each Sunday), + go to bed. (8/29/43)

It simply takes the tar right out of you

Today was another scorcher, and, we are getting near the end of the rope, especially after 5 solid weeks of it. At 10:30 this morning, when we fell out for P.T., the heat of the sun really was unbearable. But, that did not stop us from having a 5-mile cross country run. We ran along the banks of the dirty, brown Alabama River, part of the way. Several boys had to fall out. Let me tell you that none of us felt the same, the rest of the day. It simply takes the tar right out of you, to do such a stunt when the weather is so hot. Our instructor, Lt. Hughes, is a big, humorous Kentuckian who weighs about 225 lbs. + he does everything we do, naturally; but he is very considerate, except that he has to follow orders + give us a workout. (8/31/4)

The curriculum encompassed a variety of military subjects, including army ground force organization, infantry weaponry, naval ship identification, and poison gas warfare. It was a very comprehensive curriculum which George claimed would prepare him well for a commission in any of the branches of the service.

Well, today, we began sewing the old Air Corps patches back onto the right shoulders. So, we are beginning to look like "Christmas Trees" with the Air Corps patch on the left shoulder, the cadet patch on the right lower sleeve, + the ornaments on the collar. Then, too, I have a pair of sergeant stripes to put on each sleeve of my shirts. (8/31/43)

In his letter of September 2, beginning his last month at Maxwell Field, George scribed another innocent juxtaposition depicting the ugliness of war and the beauty of creation.

They gave us a "whiff" of the poison gasses

After the parade at 6 o'clock, several sections of us went back out to an area near the airfield where we had a field demonstration in chemical warfare, very similar but a bit more elaborate than the one which we had at Atlantic City. They explained how the magnesium + thermite bombs work, in incendiary work. They showed us the clusters of 100

bombs which the planes drop out when they are setting fires. Then, they gave us all a "whiff" of the poison gasses which might be used - phosgene mustard lewisite, chloropicrin. After that, they showed us the workings of a smoke tank which planes carry under their wings when they are laying a protective screen for their troops. It was quite interesting. It all took place before the backdrop of a beautiful sunset + especially two P-40's playing tag over the airport. (9/2/43)

By September 1, George was quite ready to move on from Maxwell Field. It had been a time of intensive schooling, physical training, and military drill. He began to express some discouragement, evident in his referring to the place as "this prison camp" (9-7-43). Inspections at all times of day and night, some with little warning, became harassing. The mental pressure to perform well in the classroom took its toll also, though the young Neilson held his own.

For example, to tell the North Carolina from the South Dakota, you must note that on the Dakota there is only one smoke stack which is difficult to find, while on the Carolina, there are two evenly spaced stacks. But, you have to realize that you think of other things such as size, shape of the masts, turrets, etc. before you'd ever think of noticing such distinguishing factors. Then, on the cruisers such as the Pensacola, the Atlanta, or the Marblehead, you have to look for the number of turrets + their relative position on the boat. On the Tennessee you have to notice a tower which has a handle-like feature on the top. (9/7/43)

Movies provided some entertainment, as well as an education for George. He reported seeing the movie, *Bombard* about the bombardier school featuring Pat O'Brien and Randolph Scott. He saw some scenes that were familiar, such as boys walking their punishment tours along the flight line. Another movie was about safeguarding military information.

Today they showed an American soldier saying Goodbye to his girlfriend. He gave her a trinket with his name + outfit engraved

upon it. The next scene showed this trinket in the hands of German intelligence officers who had already determined the destination of the boy's organization. Far-fetched? Or no! It really happens. Then it showed U.S. soldiers sitting beside their grave crosses, on the battle field, amidst the darkness + haze of shell smoke. They appeared like the shadow, or Marley's Ghost; and they were wishing that they hadn't talked so much. Boy! Did he get scared! (Yes, you're supposed to laugh, just as we did.) (9/7/43)

Despite Neilson's striving to see the positive side of things, it did not always work. He complained of an inability to rest and the fact that the post began to serve field rations instead of regular food. He also began to experience a return of loneliness. George revealed this while deferring to his mother the right to approve any and all female relationships.

So, I walk to + fro, all the time wishing that I had a girlfriend like the other fellows. At the same time, I built up my mental resistance by thinking of my previous experience on dates + also the reputation of the street-walking girls of Montgomery. So, I wandered, with my mental strife, until 1:30 when I met a bunch of boys, hopped into a cab + headed for the post. (9/5/43)

Ma, if I ever take up with any girl, you'll have to interview her first; because I never know what I'm letting myself in for. You sure know the answers, both of you. Well, I'm glad you almost killed me to make me wake-up, although I do know a bit about not wasting money, etc. (9/10/43)

The scenario which George witnessed on September 5 was one which was a frequent occurrence on the home front in World War II. Young soldiers hurriedly married their sweethearts, not knowing what the future would bring, or even if there would be a future for them.

It only took 5 minutes

Disregarding supper formation I made for the Post Chapel No. 2, in order to go to confession. I knelt down at about 7:30 + said my prayers. Confession was scheduled for 7:30. About 7:45, there was still no sign of the priest, although several people had gathered with the same intent as me. Then, about 5 minutes later, the priest came in, went into the sacristy + put on his mass or rather black + white robes. He went out on the altar + lit the mass candles. This was a strange situation, + I wondered what was going on by this time. After a couple of minutes, I heard the strains of the Bridal Chorus coming from the organ. I looked around quick, only to see a soldier + his bride coming up the aisle. Behind them was a WAC + an enlisted man to stand up for them. What a surprise! They knelt on the altar + the priest read the ritual immediately. Then, they had the ring ceremony. They simply had the "bare facts." It only took 5 minutes or so, before they did an about-face + marched out. What a way to be married! No people, no flowers, no nothing! (9/5/43)

George continued to be sustained by his daily ice creams, classical music, and outings with Randy Martin. His resilience to negative events kept his spirits up. On September 8, he wrote two sentences at the end of his letter that, absent a glance at history, might seem very illogical. With it, the statement makes all the sense in the world.

When we heard about Italy, we all started shouting, "furlough! Furlough!" But, I guess it's not over, at that. (9/8/43)

Italy: The Soft Underbelly of the Continent

In January 1943, the Allied leaders, absent Josef Stalin, met at Casablanca on the African coast of Morocco to discuss global strategy for the ultimate defeat of the Axis powers. Anticipating the assault on the Atlantic Wall (D-Day), Churchill pushed for a one-year delay. Roosevelt agreed to attack Fortress Europe from the south, what Churchill called "the soft underbelly of the continent."[16]

Having defeated the German Wehrmacht in the Sahara Desert, the plan was to launch a strike force across the Mediterranean to Sicily and move from there onto the Italian mainland. The opportunity to push off this campaign came in July when the Italian dictator was deposed at the hands of his own Italian Fascist Party with the backing of the Italian monarch, King Victor Emanuel III. The latter had Mussolini arrested. The new government declared war on Germany. Hitler had no intent of relinquishing Italy, so Germany moved to secure the new Italy for the Axis.

The Allied assault pushed off on July 10. It was hard fighting all the way through Sicily and onto the "toe" of Italy, which was reached on September 3. The same day, the Italian government accepted a general armistice with the Allies. Allied supreme commander US Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower announced the armistice on September 8. Still, the Germans were determined to go it alone in Italy without their old ally, Mussolini and the Fascists.[17]

The southern Italian campaign continued until the Nazis surrendered in May 1944 at the cost of 320,000 Allied casualties. Rome fell to the Allies two days before D-Day, leaving the territory to the south in Allied hands.[18]

The Casablanca Conference and the ensuing campaign to drive the Germans out of Italy had a deep personal impact on George and his brother Bob. Their paths intersected in northern Italy in the spring of 1945 as is described in later chapters.

When the armistice was concluded with Italy, Americans underestimated the strength of Germany to go it alone in Italy. The boys at Maxwell Field apparently thought the Italian armistice on September 8 was tantamount to the surrender of Germany. But it was to be two long, bloody years before the Axis powers, thereafter Germany and Japan, were defeated. The German armies were not pushed beyond Italy's northern borders until the very last days of the war in Europe.

It was my first laugh in quite some time

Junior told me of the beautiful Ft. Leavenworth conditions, which he won't be able to enjoy because of the stiff courses which he has to study there. He says that there are 250 officers from all the Allied nations in his class. They should be learning something, huh? Houpis is in the quartermaster's O.C.S. at Camp Lee. Well, this week brings forth a vastly different schedule. We have P.T. in the a.m., along with drill. But, tomorrow we'll start our gunnery course, in the morning, too. Incidentally a flier received the Purple Heart award, at ceremonies during the parade tonight. He was in the Middle-East theatre of war.

Before I forget, I must tell you about the movie which I saw at the post theatre, last night. It was the funniest I ever saw in my life. Bob Hope in "Let's Face It." Don't miss it, Ma. Every time in the show was a laugh + the boys laughed all day today over it. You could not hear the entire show, due to the boisterous laughter. The theatre was jammed with officers, too. Bob Hope is an army private. What a scream! People kept looking at me, as I almost took a fit, a couple of times. It was my first laugh in quite some time. (9/13/43)

A September cool-off, Bob Hope, and the approaching end of the Montgomery stint lifted George's spirits. Hope, who became known as the world's most famous private, dedicated himself to entertaining U.S. troops and lifting morale in the various theaters of World War II.

Back to Maxwell Field, George continued to pull down top grades in his academic studies, particularly in math, physics, and military science. He also cultivated an interest that was rare among his peers.

Art Nebel brought a book, from the cadet library, into the room. It is a collection of the world's finest poetry (no kidding!). So, whenever we have a spare moment, we pick up the book + read out a few lines. It's good to do, once in a while. Anything to get you away from the tension of this routine. (9/14/43)

It may seem strange, a boy of twenty-one years reading classic poetry just for diversion. As an army veteran, I was not

surprised. Surrounded by constant reminders of war and starved of that which lifts the spirit, the soul yearns for something of beauty, a reassurance that there is yet a world where humanity, culture, and dignity reign. Poetry, opera, and classical music met this need for George.

This morning from 7:30 until 9:30 we had instruction on the field stripping and sighting + aiming of the colt army automatic pistol. Thus, we have completed the schooling + preliminary instruction for our gunnery. We have, now, to go out on the rifle range + try to qualify with the pistol as well as fire the Thompson sub-machine gun. (9/15/43)

A continuous chain of Liberators

At 7:00, we marched out to the range, a distance of 2 miles on the far side of the airfield. There, we had range procedure instruction in the Thompson sub-machine gun. Then, everybody fired 50 shots, both single + in automatic bursts, at a target which was rotating every two seconds. The object was only to hit the target, as it was a profile, not a bull's eye affair. By the way, they really have quite a system for keeping the boys coming + going to the firing line.

While returning from the firing range at 9:30 we stopped at the end of the particular runway which was being used for taking off, by a continuous chain of Liberators. So, we watched them just pick their wheels off + soar over our heads at about 20 feet. One of them delayed in hoisting 'er up + just about cleared us by 10 feet. Now that was close! But, we knew that the pilot was simply using up all the runway + he wasn't going to overshoot the cement + pile into the ground. It was quite a thrill to watch them come right at us. The concrete on these runways is 2 ft. thick + there are approximately 30 miles of 100 ft. wide runways. It's quite a massive airport. You could put East Boston's airfield into it at least 50 times, for much of the area is still uncovered by cement. (9/17/43)

In the meantime, I counted 65 B-24's lined up on the line. There were various crews, at work changing tires, fixing spark plugs, + checking various parts of the ships. Great big fuel trucks were also going to + fro

refueling the big-babies. This is the optimum for gasoline, down here. They should put nozzles on those hoses, the way they spray that stuff all over the pavement. (9/19/43)

I'll get more and more restless to get into the air

On Saturday, they issued us an avalanche of gov't manuals which pertain to our training. A great many of them are restricted + secret, so I can't tell you the details. However, we will get courses in U.S., British, German, + Japanese as well as Italian aircraft recognition. We will learn to become familiar with all the various types naval vessels of all the nations in the world, + the particulars of each one. We will learn the Morse Code. Then we will have courses in math, physics (aerodynamics, etc.). In this schooling, they will spend a great deal of time studying aerial photographs + how they are made. It takes a long time to train the eyes to read air-photos. Don't worry, the academic work won't bother me. I imagine that as this program progresses I'll get more + more restless to get into the air. (9/17/43)

Unexpectedly, George found himself in the company of a young lady who treated him kindly and entertained his affinity for classical music and educated conversation. The young cadet was in town at a bowling alley with Phil Waters, a twenty-six year old friend from the base. The encounter and ensuing few days of association was less than romantic, but served a need for the lonely George that seemed to satisfy his interest in at least minimal female companionship.

I didn't want to bowl; so, while we were arguing or debating, a pretty girl came in with a girl who appeared to be her younger sister. She was the type of girl who did not want to get "picked up," as it turned out. After talking to her while I was watching the game, Phil found that she was a registered nurse, in charge of a group of student nurses at a private hospital, in town. She had dropped into the bowling alley, while waiting for a cab to take her to her home in the Oak Park section. As it happened, she missed her cab + so it was up to Phil + I to see that she got on her way.

That was our idea + not hers. Phil told me that he did not care to make too much conversation with her, as he was a married man. (9/19/43)

Phil asked her into the restaurant with George to get an ice-cream.

It was then, that I realized that she was a real lady. She is 25 years old + works very hard, I guess, as a nurse. She seemed like a practical nice appearing girl, too; so, we treated her nice. Before we knew what was going on, she had told us many of the reasons why Montgomery is so hard to enjoy, etc. She seemed like the Good Samaritan type. At any rate, she invited us to her home, this afternoon, near Oak Park. We accepted. (9/19/43)

Phil Walters declined to go, so George went alone. Estelle Smith, nicknamed Smitty, was from northern Alabama and lived with a Mrs. Butler for four years while working at the hospital. She told George she did not believe in flirting with cadets and only took to them because they acted like gentlemen.

So, for the first time since being in the army, I sat down + relaxed in an easy chair. During the afternoon, we listened to the radio + the symphony music, provided by the lady, who was very pleasant. It was strange, this girl talked about how the cadets treat the girls in this town + why she never bothered to go out much, because of the fact that two younger sisters had made mistakes in quick marriages. So, we finished the afternoon by walking through the zoo at the Oak Park + feeding the bears. So instead of beating my brains out for want of something to do, she took care of my entertainment for this afternoon. She said she'd like to have me call her again; but, I probably won't be here that long. (9/19/43)

There was another outing or two, but it was nothing deep, just a little friendship, an oasis in the dessert as concerns matters of the female species.

You should see the condition of the boys when they came in last night. Driesser and Donavan were both "piffed." Judging by their condition tonight, I'd say I fared best of all, + it cost me little. I really think that I met a nice person, who was interested in seeing some soldier get a little rest + relaxation.

By the way, if this letter arrives ahead of Saturday's, you are hereby notified that the [tomato soup] cake arrived in great shape. It is so good that I hate to share it with my crumby roommates who could not appreciate it. But, I'll give them a little, if I must. It's so rich and soft. Thanks a lot; but it makes me feel like being at home, a little too much. (9/19/43)

On September 20, George wrote to congratulate his sister, Betty, for her appointment as a college professor at Lowell State Teachers College in Lowell, Massachusetts. It was quite an accomplishment for a woman in that time, and George heaped praises upon her for it. Betty (Elizabeth Anastasia Neilson) would go on in later years to earn a doctorate in health and physical education and become a U.S. pioneer in the field of health education, receiving many envied honors. She later became a national lecturer, author, and consultant. In the same letter, Neilson continued the story of his shortcomings at the rifle range.

After chow, we went to the rifle range for 4 hours of "instruction fire" with the Colt 45 caliber automatic pistol. It was quite a routine! We were in groups of 3 + we rotated in the various procedures. We fired "slow fire" 10 rounds at 15 yards + 10 rounds at 25 yards. Then we fired automatic at 15 and 25 yards – 15 rounds at each. Finally we fired from 25 yards at a rotating profile target. I don't mind saying Ma I cannot hit the broad side of a barn door. I was ashamed of the score which I kept, just for the practice. Tomorrow we will duplicate the procedure, except that the efforts will be recorded on our service records, as to whether we qualify as a marksman or not. It is only incidental + does not relate to the Air Corps training. (9/20/43)

This afternoon, we completed our gunnery course, with 4 hours on the range. Naturally, I did not qualify, but I found out how much practice I need, to learn how to shoot. I sure hope the Japs don't find out how poor I am at hitting a target. I didn't even come close to hitting the blamed bull's eye. (9/21/43)

Thank you for the nice letter which I received this morning. I know what I'm missing for food at home right now – bread, pie, mustard + pickle, etc. But, I think that you have sent me enough for the present at least until I get to Primary. Then, it would be nice to have some more tomato soup cake. –yeah man! (9/22/43)

Despite the urgency to train more fliers for the expanding operations in two major theaters of the war, exceptional care was taken in assigning each cadet to the best flight trainer for that individual … allegedly.

I'm trying to make myself so that I will be a credit to you

At 11 o'clock, we went to a theatre to listen to a lecture on the purpose of the interview which we had, last night. It was given by the man who interviewed us. He is an emissary of the War Dept., + he is a civilian. He is in charge of all primary schools, which are taught by civilians, incidentally. He says that he knows every instructor; + that the interview which we had was to type us, psychologically, so that they could pick the best temperament of a teacher for us. He told us that the instructors at primary have to answer, conclusively, for every man they eliminate. Furthermore they have made a scientific study of starting students off with the proper instructors. He added that discipline was decidedly relaxed at Primary + that they are going to bend over backwards to make us have the proper attitude + physical shape for flying.

So I only had a P.X. malted milk + a chocolate bar, for dinner. However, I have been eating lightly, of late, + feel as though I can run like a deer. In fact, during P.T., today, we played basketball + I got 12 points, in our game, in the 35 minute melee. I was feeling light as a feather.

I guess you've helped us all get our jobs, Ma, in more ways than just being at home all the time. You can bet that I'm trying to make myself so

that I will be a credit to you. I often wonder if it's possible. With love, as ever, from George. (9/22/43)

The grueling weeks at *West Point South* were finally winding down. Primary flight school assignments were being announced, and some final celebrations were all that remained of the experience at Maxwell Field. George invited Smitty to the formal dance, contrary to his stated intentions of not going.

I am going to "Helena Aero Tech" in Helena, Arkansas

When we returned from class we saw the complete shipping orders posted. Our entire squadron is being split up. 117 are going to Decatur [Alabama], 53 are going to Helena [Arkansas]; + 18 are going to Lafayette, Louisiana. I am going to "Helena Aero Tech" in Helena, Arkansas. That's the 59th A.A.F. Flying Training Detachment. I understand that it's just about on the Mississippi River. I don't know much more about it. Again, the Grove City boys will be split up. Nobody knows how they did it; but, they surely split our room, perfectly. Nebel, Nelson + myself will go to Helena + the rest of the loafers are going to Decatur. What could be better! You'll be interested to know that Randy Martin is slated for Helena, too. So, we'll still be together. (9/26/43)

I received your Friday a.m. letter this morning, telling me about Bob's possibility of shipping, etc. I was surprised to hear that, as I suspected that he was planning to be there for quite a while, despite his wishes. He told me that he was tired of being "commanding officer to a batch of papers" every day. (9/27/43)

Just as at Grove City, strict military protocol began to unravel in the days before class 44D shipped out. Whether by design or default, these let-downs provided a release of tensions for the young men. Supervising officers who just hours earlier doled out sanctions seemed to turn a blind eye as water began flying as nine and a half weeks of tension broke for the men.

Well, this will be the last letter from this "Boy Scout Camp." I wish that I had the words to describe the goings on, yesterday + last night. We just let our hair down + went at it. The water fights we had at the Boat Club were like wading parties in comparison with what we had. Every bit of bed clothing + mattresses + most of what we had saved out to wear to Primary were drenched. The boys made formal ceremonies out of tearing one another's stripes off. Everything from coke bottles to suitcases were flying through the air. (10/1/43)

Thus came to a close a grueling phase of training to make boy recruits into military officers. Anticipating a long, miserable sojourn on what George called the "G.I. Pullmans," he had his pen ready to record all the details of another loathsome rail trek. What remains of that night is a specimen of prose of which no detail can be spared.

At this point, the train is halted in the middle of a corn field, somewhere between Memphis, Tenn. + Helena. We have not seen anything but corn + cotton fields, since we crossed the Mississippi River at Memphis, 2 ½ hours ago. The train seems to be stopping every few minutes. Perhaps they are making reconnaissance to see that we have not passed Helena, without seeing it. It is my impression that they only use this track once a month when they are moving cadets from one school to another.

But to recapitulate on this great voyage. We tearfully boarded these antiquated chariots at 5:15, last night. As soon as I saw the car that our group was to ride in, I nearly went hysterical with laughter. It is marked Atlantic Coast Line, on the outside. It is an old 'wood-sided' affair. At first glance, it appeared like one of those old, red relics which you see being used as workshops in rural freight yards. On the inside, it is divided into compartments like the old French *40 +8's of the last war. It looks like the same car in which Abe Lincoln wrote his famous address en route to Gettysburg. There is no need to wonder how Lincoln ever got into the mood to write a gloomy, sad speech as you know he did. He must have been pretty put-out, to have ridden this vehicle.

Then, of course, the lights wouldn't work in the damned thing. They started out to be dim, like dying candles. You had to strike a match to

see that they were burning. By the time it got really dark, the lights failed entirely. The train officer promised that the lights would be repaired at Birmingham. But they never got to it there. So, we spent the night in utter + complete darkness. I guess most of it was spent on a siding, near Birmingham. So, we tore the upholstery apart, limb from chair + improvised beds. Yes, we all got up with splices + creases in our backs, this morning. We were just thinking, "what would a bunch of recruits think if they were being shipped to their first post!" Wow, what a wreck! They must be making these frequent stops in order to put new wooden wheels on this piece of apparatus. (10/2/43)

*40 x 8's were so named in World War I because they could carry forty men or eight horses.

The dark cattle train to Helena arrived at 7:45 a.m. with 250 men to begin the next phase of training at a remote air field on the Arkansas plains along the Mississippi River.

Chapter 8

Primary Flight Training

Helena Aero Tech
Helena, Arkansas

A War of Machines

For the first time in history, death and destruction on a major scale were delivered far beyond the vision of commanders. The Battle of the Coral Sea in the Pacific on May 7, 1942 was the first air battle that took place beyond the horizons of carrier fleets on both sides. Advances in electronic guidance systems enabled remote targets to be struck through instrumentation.

By the early 1940s, radar was employed to track enemy aircraft. Huge four-engine bombers operated in the stratosphere, and radio communication revolutionized battle command and coordination. Indeed, the technology of warfare rendered combat at once safer and more deadly. The B-17 was equipped with autopilot. Its first cross-country flight in 1935, which ferried it a distance of 2,100 miles from its home in Seattle to Dayton, Ohio, was conducted almost completely under autopilot. During bomb runs, the Norden bombsight flew the plane electronically. Even bombs were equipped with sophisticated equipment that determined when they would detonate.[1]

The Western industrialized nations and Japan relied upon brilliant scientists to push the horizon of technology in order to gain advantage over their enemy counterparts. The explosion in military wizardry had its greatest manifestations in the war's amazing flying machines, Hitler's secret rocket-propelled weapons, and ultimately, the atomic bomb.

Construction know-how enabled industrial installations to bounce back quickly from aerial damage so that the impact of

bombing raids was appreciably mitigated. Germany, England, and the United States were industrial giants. Hitler, however, underestimated the nearly limitless industrial capacity of America. Conversely, Germany was only prepared to fight a short, concentrated war.

Allied bombing strategy had a two-fold aim: to destroy the vital industries that fed the German war machine, and weaken the morale of the German populace by bombing cities. It was in the summer of 1943 that the horrors of these aims began to be visited upon Hitler's Germany in ways that shocked the world.

June 10, 1943 began the combined bomber offensive of the RAF and USAAF known as Pointblank, a round-the-clock Anglo-American aerial assault designed to bring the enemy expeditiously to his knees. The plan had been hatched in May at the Trident Conference in Washington. A leadership realignment in the Eighth replaced caution with risk at the cost of increased casualties in men and planes. The military objective was clear: destroy the Luftwaffe first. Until the German fighter menace was neutralized, bombing raids would continue to be disappointing and losses deplorable. The daylight bombing experiment was still that, an experiment, and Churchill continued to attempt to persuade the United States to instead join the RAF's night-bombing effort.[2]

The air force flier strength grew 520 percent from 1941 to 1943. But relaxing enlistment standards and accelerating training schedules were expedient to keep up with combat losses, which until the summer of 1943 was most of them. Nevertheless, nothing of the rigorous air corps training program was compromised. Miller[3] wrote of the flier training program,

> It was the beginning of the most mentally demanding training program in the American military. For pilots especially, selection and training had to be rigorous. They would not be handling a rifle, but a huge, highly complex weapon of immense cost and destructive capability.

Not only was combat dangerous, but in 1943 alone, 5,603 US airmen were killed in training accidents. In the summer of 1943, the bombers began deep penetration within the German Reich. On June 25, Allied incendiary bombs ignited a firestorm that engulfed thirteen square miles of the great port city of Hamburg, leaving 46,000 dead, many burned beyond recognition. The heat from this vast inferno scorched the faces of fliers miles above the city. The ghastly scenes of death on the streets below, where superheated winds in excess of 150 mph and oxygen depravity killed victims of all ages, caused even the German high command to be shaken. This was war without restraint, the beginning of the utter destruction of a proud nation over the coming two years.[4] Said British Bomber Command chief Sir Arthur Harris, paraphrasing the Bible, "They have sowed the wind, and now they are going to reap the Whirlwind."[5]

Successive raids on Hannover, Regensburg, and Schweinfurt aimed at disabling the critical aircraft and ball-bearing factories. Huge Allied losses occurred as the fighters scattered the bomber fleets, riddling and blowing up the Forts as they approached, bombed, and left the target zones. These attacks were conducted in the last week of July in an offensive known as Blitz Week in which ninety-seven Forts were lost.[6]

Ploesti

The most notable use of heavy bombers for low-altitude bombing was in the famous Ploesti (Romania) raid on August 1, 1943. The raid was a special operation dubbed Operation Tidal Wave that aimed to disable "the taproot of Nazi power," the massive oil refineries that produced 60 percent of the Reich's oil, a complex of ten natural crude refineries. Utilizing a fleet of 178 B-24 Liberators, most of which took off from the Ninth Air Force base near Benghazi, Libya, it was considered a suicide mission. The participating fliers were instructed to write a letter home before the mission.

Ploesti was the most heavily defended place in the Reich, more so even than Berlin. The formidable defenses were ready for the Libs when they arrived on target. Clouds broke off parts of the wingtip-to-wingtip formations, resulting in chaos over the target, where hundreds of filth-belching smoke screen stations shrouded the oil works.

When the main fleet of bombers arrived at treetop level, many of the massive oil tanks were throwing flames in the air, setting the bombers on fire. After the twenty-seven-minute raid, the scorched and burning bombers were swarmed by fighters, of which 250 were based at local airfields. For the Allied airmen, it was a bloodbath. Of the 1500 some fliers engaged, 310 or one in five were killed and 130 wounded. Another hundred became prisoners of war. Over half the B-24s were shot up. Only thirty-three of the 178 attacking planes landed in condition to fly the next day. All that was left of many were skeletons.

The oil works at Ploesti suffered a 60 percent reduction in production, but with thousands of slave laborers brought in for repairs, the plants were up to full production again in two months. American bombers did not return to Ploesti until April 1944 when heavies flew out of bases of the Fifteenth AF in southern Italy. Hundreds of missions pounded the ten refineries at Ploesti, until it was declared finished off in late 1944.[7]

Heavy Losses over Germany

In mid-1943, the England-based Eighth Air Force was being shredded over Germany. Its first penetration of German air space was on January 27 of that year at Wilhelmshaven, Bremen, Vegesack, and Kiel on the North Sea. This was just weeks before George entered the service. Had he been avidly following the air war, a sense of doom may have come over him. During the initial months of his training, the Eighth suffered badly from shortages of fliers and aircraft. German fighter resistance, the siphoning of resources for the Africa campaign, and lack of a solid strategy by the Eighth Air Force cast the outcome of the European air war in

doubt. Although the Eighth had some of the air corps' best military minds, including Gens. Frank Armstrong and Curtis LeMay, the jury was still out on its daylight bombing strategy.

The heavy bombers had to fly beyond the range of the Allied fighter planes, and once the fighters turned around and went home, the heavies were on their own. Approaching the targets, the Luftwaffe's Focke-Wulf 190s and Messerschmitt 109s swarmed the bomber formations, turning them into flaming debris. Still, the command's most serious problem was the low rate of target strikes, estimated at the time to be around 3 percent of bombs hitting within a thousand feet of the target. Pilots, in order to avoid enemy fire, had to run evasive patterns. On the bomb runs, when the Norden bombsight controlled the aircraft, no evasive actions could be taken, leaving the plane especially vulnerable to the enemy's guns.

Fliers returned to empty bunks beside them, which were remade and ready for replacements the next day. Men had nightmares from planes exploding around them. Widespread psychological impairment was reported, what the air force referred to as "flying fatigue." Facing almost hopeless statistics (only 20 percent of the Eighth's fliers survived their required twenty-five missions in 1942-43), morale was low. The statistics comparing successful hits in relation to losses of men and airplanes were appalling. But in the spring of 1943, the first crews to survive the required twenty-five missions were landing in East Anglia. One celebrated plane called the Memphis Belle, whose crew was one of the first to make twenty-five, became the subject of a Hollywood movie by the same name.[8]

PRIMARY FLIGHT TRAINING SCHOOL, HELENA, ARKANSAS

Most of the Primary Flight Training was accomplished at civilian flight training schools. The schools were owned privately, and managed and staffed, including the flight training personnel, by civilians. Only a skeleton crew of military personnel was at the base, to maintain military discipline. Such was the case at

Thompson-Robbins Field, Helena, Arkansas, which lies along the banks of the Mississippi River south of Memphis, Tennessee. The facilities were excellent; and the food and quarters were equally fine. The training personnel, both ground school and flying [were] conducive to pursuing good results.

Here, we had ground school, usually for ½ day; and, we were on the flight line for the second half of the day. The main objective was to gain the initial phases of learning to fly. Our first plane was the PT-23, a low-winged monoplane, made by Fairchild Aircraft Co. Other Primary Schools had a plane with a longer experience in flying, a biplane called the "Steerman."

I should mention, parenthetically, that while at Grove City College, we all got 10 hours of orientation (flying with an instructor) at the Butler Airport, Butler, PA flying in the famous "Piper Cub" aircraft.

During the early days of the training, in early October, and before I had an opportunity to determine if I could perform, the general atmosphere of the conversation amongst the trainees was a combination of bravado, amongst the so called self-described hot shots, those who felt that the Air Corps was made up of super confident fellows who were not afraid of anything and were self-assured that they would be successful, and on the other hand, were most of the cadets who were either fearful or lacked confidence in their ability to fly. Thus, if you were not confident in your ability to learn to fly, there was a strong tendency to be timid and worried. The "theme" or barometer of success was always the number of hours of orientation that you required, under instruction, before you "soloed," were allowed to fly the plane alone without the instructor aboard. It seemed that during the early "struggling" period of flying training that everyone you were with was talking about the fact, or fiction, that they had soloed at about 3 hrs. of instruction. At any rate, it was a competitive, frightful, and prideful time from the beginning of flight training until the time you were allowed to take the plane up by yourself—solo time. Of course, there were those who did not qualify to fly solo, and thus were "washed out" of flight training. This was usually based on the decision of the flight

instructor that they did not have the capability and/or desire to advance in training. Meanwhile, it seemed that nothing mattered in the early days, until you were allowed/authorized to fly the plane by yourself – "solo."

Perhaps the most outstanding experience of the entire Air Corps experience took place here, at Primary Flight School, because the men who were flight instructors were men with lots of flying time which many of them had paid for themselves, for their love of flying. In addition, the airplanes available to civil pilots before WWII were not in the same quality category as even the Primary flight training planes. They had the minimum of instruments. Much of the maintenance was done by the pilots themselves. These pilots were called "needle, ball, ripcord" pilots because, so the saying goes, they had a minimum of instruments. So, if they got into weather or mechanical difficulties, they would jump out in a parachute. Many of these men earned their keep in flying by "barnstorming" around the countryside, from airport to airport, where they would give rides or lessons to people who were interested and could afford to take a plane ride. These men were in the late thirty and forty category, thus mature and were able to teach the dangers as well as the skills involved in flying.

As opposed to the Johnny-come-lately Air Corps officers, recently graduated from flight school whom we would later encounter for our training in "Basic" or "Advanced" flying schools, these instructors were in position to impart the true facts of life as to the nature of disciplines and mental attitude necessary to be successful and to survive in flying. The lessons derived from these men carried through and underscored the later training that we experienced.

My instructor was Don Lonstrup, a big Swede from Union Grove, Wisconsin (near Racine). Don was very firm in his admonitions as to what he wanted done when he was in the airplane with you. He was rigid, yet pleasant, as he conveyed his thoughts in a manner that never left any doubt or confusion. Some of his comments, coming from many experiences—hard earned during flying hours that he undoubtedly paid for himself, became

the keys to my success and/or survival in military flying during the war. Indeed, his teachings were, later on, to blossom out to become basic principles that formed the foundation for putting into perspective many of life's challenges with family, business, etc. For example, a very vital expression that relates to the ability to fly planes is: *There is nothing more useless than altitude above you and runway behind you* when you are landing or taking-off in an airplane. Since take-offs and landings represent the majority of the basic skills required in flying, it is obviously true that if you have not planned your landing properly in the approach, you generally use the height above the ground to adjust the approach and, if you set your landing approach so that you use up too much runway before your plane touches down, you may run out of distance on the runway to make a safe landing before the risk of trees, fences, water, etc. become hazards, leaving no opportunity to make a correction such as pulling up and going around for another landing, etc. As you look at life, beyond flying, all of this spells out a vivid definition of *planning*. And planning is certainly a vital aspect of success in life. It is a must for life's success.

Generally, in life, you get opportunities to change or correct a poor plan; but in flying in bad weather, etc., a poor plan leads to a crisis where there is no opportunity to correct, or re-do, thus leading to disaster.

Another vivid expression that I picked up from Don Lonstrup was: *There are old pilots and there are bold pilots; but there are no old, bold pilots.* The objective of this expression, then, was to cool-off and to develop into maturity the burst of self-confidence that the typical new pilot gets when he first solos and learns that he can master the job of flying alone. As you observe young men learning to fly, your first realization, however fictitious, is that the new pilot needs to be very confident, to the point of being "cocky." Thus, in the early days of training, after soloing, many new pilots begin to think of all the great things they can do. So, they begin by flying under the bridges along the Mississippi River and flying the lightly powered training planes as high as they can, seeking an altitude record on some sort of mythical basis, or going off on

an unauthorized cross-country flight resulting in misjudgments on available fuel supply, ending up by making a forced landing by reason of being out of gas. In this sequence, the syndrome of being a "hot pilot" often develops. Indeed, some of the flying experiences, such as fighter-pursuit planes, stunt flying for air shows, and demonstration teams of precision flying, suggest that boldness is common to making tricky maneuvers and thus the hallmark of a skilled pilot. But on the contrary, Don Lonstrup made clear that care and concern for procedures, including a keen understanding of what to do when things go wrong, are important to the success, survival, and longevity of any pilot. Boldness, more often, leads to a shorter life-span amongst pilots.

Somehow, I was able to listen and to absorb what Don Lonstrup was telling us about flying. For no matter what aspect of life you are thinking about, being careful and thoughtful as well as being concerned about what to do when things go wrong, are vital to long-term success and/or survival.

One of my greatest fears upon entering the flying training was that I was a worrier, and thus poles apart from being cocky. I was, on a daily basis, fearful of my inabilities to be successful in learning to fly. During the early days of primary training, I was always in envy of the "hot pilot" types who seemed to be smugly sure of themselves, and who seemed to be chomping at the bit to get up in the air solo even before they knew what it was all about. Many who fit into this category seemed to be the less educated and seemingly crude in make-up; yet I had to secretly wonder about their "courageous" attitude. But, it was a major source of anguish.

With regard to the flight training routine, we generally flew for 30 minutes each time we were scheduled. This time was detailed into a specific list of things that we were to practice and experience. Oh, such things as keeping your head on a "swivel," emergency procedures, etc. made each flight a busy time. Some of the "fun" things included making a decision as to what to do to make an emergency landing when the instructor pulled the throttle way back on the engine immediately after take-off. Upon occasion, the instructor would set the wing trim tabs to a setting that would

cause a disaster upon take-off if I did not do the checklist and get the trim tab to the proper place.

Of course, if I did not catch it, he would and it would be a black mark for me. In the beginning, there seemed to be a thousand new things to learn, and Don Lonstrup would get my attention by slapping my legs with the joy stick, as the dual controls reacted the same from mine in the rear. After explaining and demonstrating an important point, Don would constantly challenge me to do it properly the very next time. Therefore, his technique and procedures were designed to develop an "on the ball" attitude in his students.

I had a total of 5 ½ hours of flight training, at one point, as I rotated amongst 4 other students in Don's training group. This, supposedly, was a longer pre-solo time than others in the full class. It seemed like an eternity before the day of "glory" would come, when I would solo. One day, Don flew me out to one of three auxiliary fields that were used to practice take-offs and landings at St. Francis, a little town near Rte. I-40, north of Helena. After I made three landings under Don's watchful eye, he told me to pull the plane to a stop at the edge of the field. Without any conversation, he got out of the plane and said, "It's all yours. Go up and make a landing. Keep your eye on me and I will signal you as to what to do." This came as a surprise, as I guess that it was supposed to. In this way, there was no time to meditate and get scared. So, away I went, mechanically following the procedures that had been drummed into me. I took off, circled the field and made what was a good landing. I immediately observed Don waving his arms for me to continue and make another landing. I made three take-offs and landings before he signaled me to stop and pick him up. It was a great feeling of accomplishment, one of the type feelings that are not duplicated too many times in life. I had made my first solo flight on Oct. 22, 1943, in a type of endeavor that I had never envisioned myself having any capability [for]. I guess that all the exigencies of war had gotten to me and made me do it. It is wonderful to accomplish something you never thought you could, or would do.

So, it was with great pleasure that I sat back as Don flew us back to the main base. I did not have to work on the way back.

The solo milestone occurred about 1/3 of the way through the Primary Flight Training curriculum and it made the balance of the period very satisfying. After the solo experience, much of the schedule involved flying by myself and practicing maneuvers as per the instruction of Don Lonstrup. Interspersed were check-rides to measure progress. Amongst the items on the schedule were some efforts into acrobatic maneuvers, however immature and brief.

While at Primary, I began to observe that the trainees who had been student officers at pre-flight school had "fallen into the ranks" and had become regular guys. In fact, a couple of these pseudo "gold-plated" leaders washed out of our class at the Thompson-Robbins Primary School. One of them hit his brakes too soon upon landing and turned his plane upside down. And as the training progressed, it developed that a number of the other former student officers had fallen by the wayside.

During the 13-week time at Primary, most of us never left the base on Saturday or Sunday, when we had free time. Helena was not much of a town to visit, and none of us had friends or relatives there. However, a non-duty highlight of my stay in Helena was a visit by my brother, Bill, then a major in the Transportation Corps. Bill was stationed at the Port of Embarkation in Boston. At the time of his visit to Helena in October, he had just graduated from the Command and General Staff School, Ft. Leavenworth, KS, then the prestigious training school for senior officers. He visited while en route back from Ft. Leavenworth to Boston. At that point, I had not soloed yet; so Bill seemed to be a visit from home that gave me a needed uplift. We visited for ½ day. One of the military officers at Thompson-Robbins Field flew him back to Memphis, en route to Boston. He rode in an AT-6 advanced trainer used by the officers at Thompson-Robbins to keep their skills up.

All five members of the training group with instructor Don Lonstrup were successful in advancing from Primary to Basic Flying School. We had gotten the most important first step flying

instruction as well as the most meaningful lessons that we would experience. For in the Basic and Advanced schools, the instructors for the most part were only in position to impart what they had learned only a few months previously, with their total know-how being the same concentrated training that we received as new cadets. Also, the typical 2nd lieutenant who was an instructor at Basic and Advanced seemed to adopt an attitude of bitterness and frustration over being assigned as instructors rather than being assigned to combat-operational organizations. At any rate, most of them did not enjoy being instructors. (G.H.N. 1991)[9]

Helena Aero Tech was one of sixty Primary flying schools operated by civilian personnel but under the direction of the US Army Air Forces. Such schools were contracted in order to release personnel for combat duty. The organization at Helena was made up of experienced flight instructors, ground school teachers, dispatchers, maintenance, and other personnel.

Anastasia ("Ma") Neilson received a letter from R. A. Van Devere, managing partner of Helena Aero Tech, dated October 6, 1943.[10] The letter read like a welcome from a summer camp. The concluding statement was in a tone unrecognizable in military affairs:

> I hope that I may have the pleasure of meeting many of the parents of the cadets, and I should like to assure you again that we shall leave no stone unturned to give your boy every attention and to insure his well-being while he is with us.

How then, in this ostensibly caring and professional environment, did George get to the point of wanting to bail out during training flights because of the badgering of a rabid instructor? The question was answered by the student himself on October 22, the day of his first solo flight and one of the highest points of his life. But to get to that point, the young cadet had to be

buffeted by the barking dog in the trainer's seat. The story begins, again, on a loathsome train trip.

The trip to Helena on a rickety, dirty, old coach was common fare for military transportation in the day. But despite an uncomfortable ride and the appearance of the miserable little town on the Arkansas plains, George was excited to finally be at Primary Flight School. His initial impressions of the place were encouraging.

The entire set-up is like a dude ranch

But, this place is like the typical air school that you have seen, in the movies. Our barracks is right up against the flight line where all the planes whirl in + out. We are in barracks with 35 in each. But, they are beautiful, with inner-spring mattresses, etc. The entire set-up is like a dude ranch. You should see the mess hall, etc. They are really nice. We've all tried on our hot pilot clothes. This place will be like a country club as far as discipline goes. We will start flying and ground school, on Monday. The ground school consists of two subjects at a time. Monday we'll be on the flight line for half of each day + in class for the other half. They have 5 men to each instructor + each student awaits his turn on the line. Tomorrow, I'll have a chance to examine the planes. They are all Fairchild PT-19s and 23s. This is the real thing. I can't wait to get started! But, I'm so tired that I had better hit those inner spring mattresses. (10/2/43)

There were few things that lifted the young cadet's spirits like a good meal, and at Helena there were plenty of them.

About the food, there is plenty of it. I've had a quart of milk at each meal, so far. So, that's a good criterion. Besides we can take our time while eating it. There seems to be not too much of a hurry to get anywhere. (10/3/43)

By the way, we still have more money coming to us from Maxwell. I now have $35. + I am looking for the chance to send it home (that is when I'm sure I'll have enough). I have my eyes on that December insurance bill.

I'll have enough by them, don't worry. You see, everything like laundry, etc. costs an awful lot. So, money does not keep. But, you can see this directive, for yourself. (10/3/43)

Accompanying this letter was a page and a half directive in heavy militarese explaining the distribution of a total of seventy-five dollars. From this was deducted a dollar a day for *subsistence* (food) and $1.25 per day for quarters (room) as HAT was a civilian school, and the government did not reimburse the costs of room and board for the trainees. There was a $2.50 monthly fee for the Cadet Club and post movies. The army was not a way to get rich, although these monetary amounts cannot be compared to today's currency values.

In terms of his mental attitude, George's metamorphosis at Primary was repeated in later training phases. The most difficult part was the beginning, when the cadet had to adjust to changing aircraft, expectations, and supervisors. Initial antagonism gave way in a few weeks to a state of acceptance, followed by a few weeks of marking time. In the final weeks, when the challenges of the school had been virtually mastered, anxiety began to build as the cadet looked to the next phase with a longing to move on.

George had looked forward to Primary, as it would put him in a plane again, his appetite for flying having been whetted sufficiently during the ten hours in the air at Grove City. But his instructor knocked him off his equilibrium, rode him hard, and got his dander up. Don Lonstrup took George and his other four trainees to the point of mutiny before they saw purpose in the browbeating he put them through. Gone was the excitement and thrill of the Cub Cadet. The flight training that began in earnest at Helena was hard work, designed to turn boys into the men who would fly some of the most advanced flying machines on earth into the maelstrom of war. It was serious business that would exact every whit of skill, concentration, and mental fortitude that a young man could produce.

Most of the time the cadet was functioning on the very edge of his ability, which had to be constantly extended to make him

equal to the task. The pilot of a B-17 was not only responsible for getting the ship to the target and back safely but was also the commander of his ten-man crew. Such responsibility in the hands of a twenty-two-year-old man is almost illogical. Yet World War II was no ordinary time. The future of freedom on earth was at stake, as well as the very lives of legions of military men and women and hundreds of millions of civilians.

Primary, like other phases of pilot training, was to push the young Neilson to the brink of despair. He knew that the key to his personal survival, as that of the entire Allied cause, was to fight back from the precipice of defeat.

He kept hollering, "Rudder! Rudder! Rudder!"

This flying is work! I'm telling you. I went up for 45 minutes, this afternoon; and, believe me, I sweated blood, and it was a cool day, too. Lonstrup, the instructor, was in my "ear," from the very moment that I got into the plane. Boy! Oh Boy! You have to do 1 million things at once, in addition to 6 other things in addition to other things. He yelled bloody murder at me for 45 minutes. The tubes require "getting used to," for it's hard to hear what he says through the speaking system. (By the way, it is one way, only.) So after he bawled me out for periods of 2 + 3 minutes, I'd simply shake the stick to indicate that I couldn't hear him. You can imagine how he felt about that. I felt like "bailing out" when I knew he was talking to me and I could not hear. He kept hollering, "Rudder! Rudder! Rudder! This is a rudder plane. Don't use the stick like it was a lever." I felt like tearing it out + handing it to him. (10/5/43)

I never worked so hard in all my life!

Well, I've completed my first day at Primary, and I've discovered that there's no let-up here, either. It was quite a complete day, starting at 5:30 a.m. We had our two classes right off the bat. First, we had theory of flight, aerodynamics + then engines, the theory of the internal combustion engine, etc. That brought the program up until 9:00. Then, we went to the barracks + changed into P.T. clothes for ½ hr. of drill + 1 hour of

athletics. That brought us up to noon time. We then sat down to the best dinner which any of us have had since we've been in the army.

In the afternoon, ½ of our class went on the flight line, with ½ of class 44C. They use ½ the field + we had the other half. Each afternoon, this week, we will spend 5 hours on the flight line, where 130 PT-23s are at the use of the boys, here. The first thing we did was to meet our instructor. Both Nebel + I have the same instructor along with 3 others. Regardless of the Maxwell hullabaloo, we were assigned alphabetically.

The instructor is a big man, about 30, I should say. His name is Lonstrup. I guess he's okay. He showed us all over the plane + spent most of the time explaining cockpit procedure + traffic patterns + the general layout of the area around the field. Boy! This ship is no Cub. It has all the gadgets on it + it is pretty powerful. Today we each got a 20 minute joy-ride to let us know what it is all about.

"Keep the star on the wing, on the horizon! Keep the nose up, watch your air-speed, you can kill yourself in an airplane if you don't keep flying speed." A thousand different things. But, I didn't give up + finally he said that I did a couple of good gliding turns. To that I rejoiced in triumph, for 1/10 of [a] second or less. Ma, I never worked so hard in all my life! The instructor did the same to the other 4 boys, too; I don't know how he keeps going. Artie Nebel's chin was on the ground, when he came in. He rode last + Lonstrup was pretty exasperated at that point. Everybody got yelled at, today, although some fellows have calm instructors.

As you look at this place from the air, it appears like a big country resort, with the hangars as big barns + the white buildings as houses. It appears too compact + small to be an army camp or military reservation. It is out in the country, so to speak. On the flight line, at night, there is no flying of course at Primary schools; but, many mechanics, men + women alike, are busy checking the ships. I can see them, 150 ft. from this window.

I'll be needing that warm clothing soon, I guess. Facilities for cleaning clothes in this "Dust bowl" are poor, so we'll wear dirty clothes I guess.

Now, you must understand that I might not get time to write all that I might like, at times. For, this is the supreme effort + these are the critical days. I have to concentrate on a lot and it requires some study. Time really passes fast, + the days are not really long enough, not even to write to

everyone. So, that might be curtailed, somewhat. So, I'll sign off, now + I want you to know that I'll do my best for you. (10/5/43)

He was on my ear the entire time

It's a terrible "rat-race" here believe me. I've had less time to rest than I had at Maxwell. But, the day passes very fast. This training is so new + strange that I don't know just how to interpret it.

I had a 45 minute ride today. I think I took off + landed okay. But. I did not do one thing right, in between times. You'd be astounded if I told you what came over those Gosport Phones, today. He was on my ear the entire time. "You're not flying a kite anymore," says he. "If you put back pressure on the stick, you gain 100 feet before you know it." You see, I have one of those instructors who believes in that type of instruction. I guess that ½ of them are that way. He really crushes the old morale. I never was so tired in my life as when I came down, today. But you recover immediately. I'll take it as long as he can yell; but, you'd be surprised at what he seems to expect. Don't worry though, I'm trying to integrate my thoughts with those of other boys who have passed through this stage. After 11 hours one instructor told a boy that he was afraid to go up with him anymore; so, he told the boy to do it himself. The boy soloed. (10/6/43)

All this about Primary and "relaxation" is the bunk

All this about Primary + "relaxation" is the bunk, here at least. Even while waiting on the flight line, we don't have a chance to write a letter. Besides, we're too busy thinking about our procedure + what's going to happen to us. Then, too, we have to go through the routine of meeting the plane, each time it comes in. We have to make out a form, etc. for each fellow who rides.

I also got a letter from Junior. He is not too far from here; so maybe we'll get together. He gave me a detailed outline of his work, which looks like the real thing. He is also in line to become a major. He informed me that Col. Russel had sent in his papers for promotion. Junior also was excited to tell me about his ride in the Douglas Dauntless, one of the army's reliable dive bombers. He said that he had a ride up the Missouri River on it, Saturday. Would I like a ride in that?!

Well, today I had a 50 minute hop + I did better, I think. At least the instructor was not "chewing" today. Oh yes! He talked plenty; but he didn't threaten to tear out the stick or anything of the like. We practiced a power on + a power off stall, today. That's quite a thrill to watch the plane fall off, completely without control, for a second or two. These planes really drop, too. You see, we must learn what to do in case of the unseen emergency. It's real hard, mental work, up there. I surprised Lonstrup by showing him the traffic pattern "in" today. (10/7/43)

The kid's teeth were chattering

Well, I can certainly see why they gave us 8 months of pre-flight work! I don't know how I would have stood the mental strife of this first 5 days of instruction in flying. I'll not go into details, for you could not appreciate the way these instructors go about getting the most out of you.

While they have you in the plane, they give you the most unmerciful mental pounding that you ever saw. You'd like to bail out. They make you feel sorry for your idiotic mental capacity, to say nothing of flying ability! Boy! It's the newest thing + most unusual thing I've ever run into. Every day it's a period of hell. Poor Mucks! One of my companions with Lonstrup, the instructor. He got chewed for the first time about his ability today. He's a Wisconsin boy + rather lackadaisical, L'il Abner type, you know. Today the kid's teeth were chattering with the shock of his set-back when he climbed out of the old PT-23. It was just his day, I guess. Now, he knows how we feel - Nebel, Bob Muller (Grove City), + a Jim Murphy + myself. Yes, Grove City flying was a thrill! This is work, every inch of the way. (10/8/43)

The town – oh yes! There is one; in case anyone should ask you. But, it is even more dead than Grove City was. They have a cadet club for the officers + cadets of the post here. It is an old Southern mansion that has been donated for the purpose. They have a small orchestra playing fort dancing; and, they serve beer. The town girls come up there for the boys to dance with. It certainly holds no fancy for me.

You know, I'm pretty fortunate in having Earl Nelson as a bunkmate. He's a clean-cut man from the Middle West + we get along fine. I always

get along with olders anyhow. Randy Martin is just down the way from me, in this bay. (10/10/43)

He took each of us up in a proverbial 'gale of wind'

There's no use of having pictures of me all decorated in a flying outfit, etc. + then have me not be one. About the work, the instructor, who has not given any of the 5 of us one word of encouragement yet, gave us a thorough dressing down today. He told us that we started off to be the best class he has had. (We were surprised at that); + he expected us to make up for the poor class he had last. Now, he thinks we are the worst ever; + he cannot understand it. He said that it was not his worry, etc., if we wouldn't think. Just to show us how poor we are, he took each of us up in a proverbial 'gale of wind,' today, + made us fly the rectangular course + "S" turns. These maneuvers are wind correction affairs + became almost impossible to do, in a high wind, when the plane is blown along its course almost sideways. It was an excellent opportunity for him to make us feel cheap. However, as low + bad as the 5 of us do feel, I have a feeling, deep down, that it is psychology that he is using. I believe that we are doing as well as the other boys. I just have that strange feeling. We surely cannot be as bad as he says or we wouldn't be here. He demands perfection on things the boys with 40 hours cannot do, yet. I guess he's shooting at perfections. You folks cannot appreciate the mental anguish, at this point. What is more, it shouldn't be your worry. But, it's typical of the "Primary Jitters" that everyone gets. Oh, it's a big muddle, isn't it? However, I guess it will all clear up. At least, we're getting good food. But, never tell anybody to sign up for this. (10/12/43)

George became preoccupied with the goal of soloing. He wrote repeatedly of it, and became annoyed as other cadets were given this opportunity while he "sweated it out."

We will not learn anything until we get up there by ourselves

It rained all morning; so, we did not fly. A brisk sou'wester blew in + laid down the ever-present cloud of dust + also gave us a respite from the

routine. So, we spent this morning at least until 10:00, in conference with our instructors. Lonstrup talked things over + gave us some pointers on landings which we'll be doing now. Then, the conversation wandered until we were talking about combat planes, etc. He still has given us no confidence; but, he did expound his point of view as an instructor, etc. So, we can begin to read his mind + finally interpret that there is a chance. He told us that we will not learn anything until we get up there by ourselves; so that made us feel a little better. However, it will all be uncertain, for a while. He also recounted some stories of boys who were diving on their girl friends' houses, etc. It was all to bring home to us the fact that it does not pay to fool around up there, as so many of the boys do. (10/13/43)

You'd be amazed at the methods of instruction

I'm glad to hear that everything is well + that you have been able to get out for a ride, now + again. Boy, I'd certainly like to go for a ride up through the pretty Concord Road that we took many times, a couple of falls ago. The foliage must be beautiful up through Carlisle, Bedford, etc., now. I don't imagine that there are many people able to enjoy the beauties of that fall color this year.

You should see the antics that we have been going through, in our effort to impress our memories with everything that has to be done, during a ride. We have all sorts of directions written on the legs of our fatigues, in indelible pencil. Our legs look somewhat like those "beer jackets" used to look like, with the writings all over them. Some boys also write "Gas" in large letters all over their hands + even the instrument panel, so that they'll remember to switch gas tanks every 30 minutes. Many of them forget; so, some instructors make their boys walk up + down in front of the hangar for an hour, wearing a parachute + holding a big sign which says "I forgot to change my gas tanks." Some of the boys have had to walk back from auxiliary fields (3 or 4 miles) because their instructors have gotten disgusted with them. Yes, you'd be amazed at the methods of instruction that are necessary in teaching you to fly.

It seems like there is no rest for the wicked, doesn't it? But, I'll keep plugging. I'm beginning to get into the swing of things, here. It'll be hard all the way. There's no let-down from now on. But, I'm learning to have

my mind change, during our few spare moments. So, I get some mental relaxation, at least. (10/14/43)

The instructor sat at the end of the field and prayed

Today, several of the boys who have gone over 8 hours (the minimum) soloed-out. That is, they took-off, circled + landed three times while the instructor sat at the end of the field and prayed. One of the Grove City boys, Herb Nuber, managed to do this trick. Consequently, he got dragged through a large, man-made puddle of water + then dipped into a wheel-barrow full of mud and water + finally over his head. That is the ritual that goes with soloing, here.

About myself, I am beginning to take on the old confidence for the first time. Lonstrup sits back + watches the old mirror most of the time. He seems to be waiting for us to make errors + try to correct them before he puts in his two cents worth. It makes you feel like he's depending on our ability to some extent.

However, the instructors know that they can only force an impression of what to do, on your mind; but, the real learning begins when you go up + find out how, by yourself. So, they hasten to get a little confidence into us, as soon as they have driven the fundamentals into us. I am of the opinion that Lonstrup will be pretty sure, before he lets us try it ourselves. You know that these men are watching out for themselves, also. These instructors are disciplined almost as rigidly as we are, in that they have to pay varying for fines for every little thing that is done wrong, from filling out the flying forms right up to any possible mistakes in flying procedures.

After being out in the wind all morning, the boys are just about ready for sleep, when afternoon comes, especially after a good hot meal. The boys simply pass out. In the 1st class at 2:00, you'd scream if you could see it from the front. They boys in back put their heads against the wall, with their faces straight-up + pass out. I tried to take notes today, but my pencil fell out of my hands 5 times before I quit. (10/15/43)

That was one of the smaller ones

Well, last night I went into Helena again. The stores on the main street look like the Navajo Indians raided them, on the way west. It's the

dingiest place on earth. There are several drug stores; and they are all filthy places, at that.

Now you can believe this or not, but here's a story about rats that's pretty funny, yet it's not. We (Randy + I) went in to get a milk shake, at 12:00, last night. While we [were] waiting for the girl to get it mixed, a rat, which must have been 2 feet long, ran across under the girl's feet. She didn't even flinch. So, when we caught her attention, we asked if that was one of the big ones or one of the small ones. "Oh!" she said, "hadn't you noticed them? That was one of the smaller ones." I saw 3 rats while we were in that drug store (15 minutes). (10/17/43)

Two of George's trademark similes described his experience at the Helena bowling alley, where they played ten pins in the Southern style.

However, I shouldn't think that the Helena alley would be any criterion of a person's ability to bowl. For the alleys are as rough as the road leading to the boat club, from the Parkway, and the balls are as roughly shapen as the squash that used to be on the roadside stands. (10/17/43)

As much as George wanted to put girls out of his mind, letters from two young women continued to stir up some lady dust in his mind. What made it hard for him to dismiss it entirely was the uniquely high character they displayed. He wrote of Smitty,

Well, this girl almost fell over backwards when I told her that I didn't smoke, drink + all the rest. She said that in her varied dealings with people, as a nurse, she had trouble finding people who think the way she does. She has very high ideals, comes from a good family (I guess) + certainly talks nice. She told me that she ordinarily would rather work nights than go into the city + be subjected to the taunts of the boys there. (10/17/43)

I still have not got too much confidence. I now have 7 hrs. + 23 minutes, which is the same as the other boys in my group. Randy has 11 hrs. + he has not soloed, yet. So, it can happen at any time. By the way,

one of the boys got 50 tours for signing out on open post last Wednesday when he was supposed to be in the hospital. (10/18/43)

I sure don't like this guy

I got a 50 minute ride today, and the weather was plenty rough. Believe me these are rather trying days. He soloed Murphy out, yesterday, after giving us the worst dressing down, yet. He accused us of thinking we were going to solo, so, he proceeded to take us up + prove that we were not ready. However he turned that right around and decided to let Murphy go up. This fellow has been in the same boat with us all along. He hasn't seemed to be any better than the rest of us. So, that's how it goes. After we got finished today, Nebel, Muller, Mucks + myself were all so low-down that we had to finally tell him that the reason we couldn't seem to do what he wanted up there, was that we have become afraid of what he says when we do something wrong. As a consequence of it all, we have all lost what little confidence we ever had. So, it'll be up to him to bring us together, if he wants to. It has been mental agony. I sure hope that Lonstrup knows what he is doing. All I can think is that it will all be for the best; but, instructors can make or break you. I sure don't like this guy. I'm not one to give up; but, he sure could easily convince you. When you get a guy like this, you have to want to fly! (10/20/43)

I don't think that anybody is having the mental strife that we are

I did not fly, today, so there was nothing wrong with what I did up there (see what I mean?) However, he did take the talking to which we gave him, I guess; for he bent over backwards to be polite to Muller + Mucks today. He talked so calmly that they could not understand what he was driving at. So, you see we're in quite a predicament. Almost all of the boys have either finished their 3 stages of solo so that they are qualified to go by themselves or they are in the process. But, the 4 of us are amongst the few that have not soloed. So, it is not our problem. It must be his idea. The other boys, who have been "checked-out," have begun to pile up the time. They take planes up for an hour and ten minutes at a crack according to the dispatcher's orders. I go up first tomorrow; maybe the scenes will shift

then. I don't think that anybody is having the mental strife that we are. And, I might add, it is not that we can't fly; for, I know that I can do better than those (many, at least) who have soloed out already. By the way, 5 or 6 boys have been eliminated already. At least, I have not reached that stage, yet. I don't plan to either. I am certain that I can do a good job of flying if given the proper frame of mind, by the instructor. (10/21/43)

Before I knew it, I was on my way up into the sky for my first airplane ride, alone!

Dear Ma and Betty, I soloed today! After 9 hrs. + 56 minutes of dual instruction, the instructor decided to let me try it, today. So, I've got my start at last. Naturally, we have felt that he was going to have to solo us soon; but, since the wind was blowing briskly out of the northeast, we figured that nobody would solo today.

Here's how it went! Being first man up, I got into ship no. 116 at 12:45 + we started off as usual. However, Lonstrup acted very nice to me, instead of blasting the old hot air through those tubes. He took me to St. Francis Field, an auxiliary field to the northeast + over the ridge, from the main airdrome. It is very pretty over there, at this point. The trees in this wooded section are all beginning to turn color + there are two pretty bodies of water to look at – the Mississippi + the St. Francis Rivers. It was quite a change from flying over those square sections of land which lie to the west of the river. It was the first time that I had been there; so, it was all new to me. We made 9 take-offs + landings + for the first time, he said that I had made some good landings. I almost fell out of the plane. I told him that I thought he was helping me; but, he said that he was not. So, he said, "Do you think you can do it?"

I said. "I don't know!" But I knew that I should be able to. The only hesitancy was that he had not bothered to instill any confidence in to me, at all. I still believed that he was coming to my assistance on the landings. However, he convinced me that I was doing it all, myself. So, we pulled over near the wind "tee" + he got out. He handed me the book + told me to write it out for dual time. I could hardly write my own name; but, with his help, I got it straight.

Then he asked if there were any more questions? I told him that I had made no bad landings, and, I asked for a few pointers on just what to do if I should bounce, badly. He said if there was any doubt about my landing, I should give it the throttle as soon as I bounced + go around the pattern again, by all means!

As soon as I was straightened away on the field, I "poured on the coal" (as they say) without even stopping to think about it. Before I knew it, I was on my way up into the sky for my first airplane ride, alone! Here's how it went. All the way along the traffic pattern, I could hear Lonstrup yelling at me just as if he were sitting there in front of me. At every turn, I could hear, "Not too steep! Keep that nose up. Watch that wind-drift," etc. Then as I flew level I could hear, "Keep those wings level, watch your altitude," etc. Everything that he had ever told me came right through those phones, it seemed. I seemed to do much more of an accurate job than with him up there in front of me. I was too busy to miss him. (10/22/43)

After the euphoric cadet let down, Lonstrup sent him up for two more landings. The final landing took three attempts. Getting "peeved" at himself, he had decided they would have to shoot him down, but he brought in the third landing with great relief.

When I finished my 3rd landing, the instructor seemed satisfied + said that I could ride back to the airport. Thus, I got my first ride in a plane. All I did was sit back + look around. But, he let me land it, when we got in. I'm on my way now! I really felt good up there, today. Now, I can wear my goggles on the front of my head + put my Air Corps wings back on my overseas cap! This is it! I guess I'm sure I can keep going, now. Log Book Solo! 40 minutes. (10/22/43)

After the climatic experience of his first solo flight, George's training went forward at a remarkable pace. Much of his work henceforth would be practicing maneuvers on his own. Two days after the first solo flight, he went up for seventy minutes by himself, practicing maneuvers that Don had merely demonstrated to him. His confidence soared, as did his skill. For others, it was not quite that simple.

About the flying, let it suffice to say that everybody almost had heart failure watching that fellow trying to get nerve enough to be satisfied with a poor landing. If it wasn't for the major flying beside him, he would have killed himself, at the very end. When he came down, he had 5 minutes of gas left. (10/24/43)

I could have had a quart of whiskey

Last night, we ate in town, because most of us missed chow due to the episode on the field. So, we (Earl and I) had a good steak, in town ($1.25). Nothing but the best for us! I also could have had a quart of whiskey, which my instructor offered me when he ran into me, in town. I almost fell over; but, I told him I could not use it. I told him that Nebel or Muller might like it; but, I didn't know where they were. He drives a sporty roadster + seems like a nice man, on the ground strictly. Anyway I could not find Nebel or Muller; so they lost out. (10/24/43)

One of the boys went above the clouds, today. Consequently, he was lost for 2 hours; but, he finally landed in a cotton field, in Marianna, a nearby town. (10/25/43)

Well, today, I got a 41 minutes check on "high work." So, I'm eligible for solo ships. We were up at 6,000 feet where it was exceedingly cold! However, I had on the heavy wool-leather flying equipment (but I have no boots yet); so, I was comfortable. Lonstrup demonstrated several new stalls to me which he wants me to practice on my own hook! For instance, we have to learn to stall + recover the plane out of a climbing turn and a steep turn, where the plane breaks through the horizon, out of control, at funny angles. Much practice is required for this.

I received my first compliment, today, when I showed him a two-turn precision spin. I brought the thing right out, with the nose over a roadway, below. He said, "Keep it up + you'll have no trouble with Basic Trainers, at least with spins." So, I feel encouraged momentarily. It will be up to me to practice these maneuvers, myself, so, they'll hold me responsible for advancement I expect. Remember, I am trying hard,

primarily so that I'll not let you down, after what you have done for me. (10/26/43)

Every fear that you could have, came to mind

I have two tours to walk on this open post night, as a penalty for not having time to do my share of cleaning up the barracks + being late for a formation. But, since this tour walking is more or less of a joke, I am walking them by writing letters, at this point. All I have to do is report to the orderly room every so often.

Yes, by this time I have taken up the "buggy" by myself. In fact, I went up this morning for an hour and ten minutes, by myself. Now I am not afraid to admit that I was plenty timid + thought quite a bit. When I got down, I meekly mentioned it to Lonstrup; but he said that it was perfectly natural to be timid on your first jaunt alone. So, I felt better. But, I had the strangest thoughts + fears + some responsibility. I thought of things that had never come to mind, before – jumping out – would I be afraid? What would I do if the engine quit? Every fear that you could have, came to mind. I even began to wonder if I would ever like it up there. I also began to wonder if I would get lost or be able to let down into traffic properly. Everything became one enormous question mark for me. (10/27/43)

On this ride, George encountered some heavy haze, which made him "a little nervous." He flew to the east to escape it. It was amazing to think that just a few days earlier he was being chastised right and left by his instructor, and was now up there deciding where to go, what do practice, and dealing alone with his thoughts and fears.

I missed somebody to yell at me

As I got near the town, I began to think that I needed to practice doing "S" turns + rectangular course. So, I throttled back, pulled out the carburetor heat + glided down to 740 ft. + practiced for a half hour or so on that. Then, I decided to do some climbing turns + get up high again. Perhaps I would try a spin. But, no, I was not quite up to that. That front

seat looked a little too empty, this trip. I was going crazy with loneliness. I missed somebody to yell at me or talk to me. (10/27/43)

Boys are still getting lost every day. In fact, a fellow, who marched beside me at Maxwell got lost + let down in a cotton field, as his gas was getting low. In so doing, "he flew it into the ground." That is, he misjudged the field + the contour of the land. Consequently he demolished the airplane + did not so much as scratch himself.

I began to feel more at ease up there, today; so, I tried a few stalls in order to get into it gradually. All the upperclassmen are completing their time, now, so, they were all flying upside down + doing acrobatics – things in + out of the book, you see. You have to keep your eyes open with all the planes in the sky around here. (10/28/43)

George wrote of another Lonstrupism:

He says that that he wants us to learn that no matter how much you practice flying, you never master it. "The fellow who says they can do certain things perfectly is a fool," he says. He thinks that the students (meaning us) who think they are doing badly in everything + are just getting by + continually worrying, will ultimately be the best pilots, because such a fellow will always try to improve himself. He says that a cocky student is a big worry to instructors + they have a tough job instilling danger into them.

So, all in all, he has a sound philosophy + is very understanding. He knows how he makes us feel, I guess. I shall never forget the day he told us that we thought we were going to solo! Was he burning? My, oh my! You, see, he soloed each of us when we least expected it. What happens from here, of course, is a different story + we'll have to plug hard. (10/29/43)

The great story of Helena was the process of how the controversial trainer Lonstrup, through grueling methods, turned Neilson into a strong pilot. Disdain was transformed into a life-long respect that outlived their student-trainer relationship by many years. Whether or not his methods would stand up to the muster

of good leadership by today's standards, the proof was in the pudding at the end of Primary.

I noticed innumerable planes flying aimlessly around in circles

I was assigned a solo ship for the first period of "an hour + ten." So, we all got them "in the breeze" about 8 o'clock. At that time, it appeared that the morning haze, which hangs over any land which is located near water, was going to burn off; for visibility was fairly well. In just 15 minutes, a "soup" closed in on us all, up there. I had just taken off + was climbing up when I noticed clouds at 1300 ft. So, I started to head downwards. Pretty soon, I noticed innumerable planes, all at the same altitude flying aimlessly around in circles. Apparently, they all had the same idea as me; for, they were undecided as to what to do. Finally, I decided to head back to the field + find out what was doing. Sure enough, when I pulled up on the flight line, the yellow flag was up, signifying dual flying only. After a few minutes, the red flag went up, to indicate that all planes should come in. To be certain that all the boys got in, one of the captains of the army went up in the advanced trainer, which is here for their use, to chase the boys down. After a while he went up above the soup + found several of the boys nonchalantly doing maneuvers above it all. Naturally, they were not supposed to be there, but there's always some fellows who are adventurous. (10/31/43)
*land

As an anecdote to the foregoing story, one of the boys landed sixty miles away in a cow pasture an hour and a half later. Another landed forty miles away. Getting lost was common, at which event an instructor was sent to fly them "out of the mess." In addition to the Primary students, several Basic students came into Helena from Walnut Ridge and Newport, Arkansas, 150 miles away.

George received mail from his friends, Joe Hughes and a Mr. Houpis, the latter of which was about to graduate from the quartermaster's officer candidate school (OCS). He also got a letter from Smitty, the nurse from Montgomery, who had expressed her possible intentions to visit George. George,

however, never encouraged that, stating to Ma and Betty that he would make no special plans if she did come. He regularly received correspondence from Betty's friend Barbara Boyd, though he made clear that he would not allow the attention of young women to interfere with the business at hand. As things played out, he meant it.

During the weeks at Helena, George seemed to experience a heightened awareness of his faith, as he mentioned church more frequently and stated his awareness that only God would be there to help him on a solo flight. For a donation of $3, he lit a candle for "Pa" at the local church, stating:

> At least, I tried to remember Pa. I guess he helps me, doesn't he? (11/1/43)

She rolled right over on her back, before she nosed down

> While I was up there, I practiced spins, + stalls most of the time. We have a total of 12 stalls to be able to master. You see, stalls are the fundamental parts of the training, here. The idea of making us learn these various stalls is to give us practice in recovering the plane, should it get out of control at any conceivable angle. Consequently, we purposely cause the plane to lose flying speed, at all the various angles (climbs, glides, turns, etc.). You see, when the plane stalls, it acts like a wet handkerchief + would like to fall like a leaf. So, all stalls are recovered by putting the plane in a dive + gaining speed with full throttle. Then, you level off, when cruising speed is regained. Once, I did not wait for the ship to stall, before I kicked the rudder. So, she rolled right over on her back, before she nosed down. Boy, what a sensation! However, none of these sensations are as awful or as breathtaking or as seemingly dangerous as the drop-off on the steep side of a roller-coaster run. (11/1/43)

George explained the dangers of carburetor icing, which he wrote could occur at any temperature when moisture is present. This, he added, was the most common cause of crashes on

commercial airliners. Fortunately, by applying heat to the carburetor, this icing can be completely avoided.

On November 2, the class before George's completed Primary and most of the class was moving on to Basic Flight Training at Walnut Ridge, about two hundred miles north and west of Helena. George began to be concerned about gaining weight again, attributing this to the cooler weather, the good food, and the ready availability of of ice-cream of which five scoops could be had for ten cents.

My solo landings are pretty wicked

If I go up, dual, tomorrow I will be in for a brow-beating; because, I have not been up dual for a week and a half. So, we'll see! I'm ready for him! He analyzed my method of doing spins, as I did them solo. He told me that I didn't wait for them to stall, so I did a slow roll + went on my back, first. I rather thought that they were feeling a bit funny. No wonder! You're not supposed to do slow rolls at this stage of the game.

I imagine that my 20 hr. check is just around the corner now; as I have 19 hrs. on the books, at this writing. My solo landings are pretty wicked; I sure hope I can do better in the near future; but, traffic is such that it is hard to concentrate on the landing, while watching the other planes which are landing alongside. (11/1/43)

After class 44C moved on, George's class (44D) moved to the upper-class barracks. Fresh students arrived from Maxwell Field and the 44D boys were instructed to put them at ease and not scare them with horror stories.

Primary training involved what George called "bracket stage landings." This procedure involved marking a line on the field and observing the trainees as they landed. The score was based on how close the landing was to that line, either "under" or "over."

But, my landings were horrible. I came near the point; but, I bounced just about every time. However, all the boys were having similar trouble, due to the wind + maybe the anxiety of knowing you were supposed to

land in a certain place. Then, too, there was the field. I had never been there before. It looked like a beautiful green landing field from the air; but, if I was in trouble, I would rather land in the trees on the ridge than land in that field any day. Bumps! Holes! Everything! Then, to top it off, the final landing was supposed to be made between baskets 100 feet apart, in the middle of the field. This, I did perfectly + I made my only good landing of the day. (11/4/43)

As time passed, George was less concerned about getting a furlough and going home, writing, "You know, you rather get involved in the thing." (11/5/43) The cadets had to get sixty-five hours of flying before finishing Primary, so they took every opportunity to go up. While solo flying, they had specific skills to practice and the trainers would expect them to show progress.

Today, I started off with an hour-ten of solo time, in which I practiced some "poor" stalls + some *chandelles. The ceiling was about 3500 ft., as there were clouds just at that level. So, you are supposed to keep an eagle eye open for bad weather, as well as for the boys who come spinning through the clouds, after having been above them (as they are not supposed to do). You actually feel as if you are wasting time up there, honestly; and, the instructors don't hesitate to tell you about that fact, either. (11/5/43)
*level 180° turns

On November 5, Neilson got his first hour in the Link Trainer, as the flight simulator was called. It was designed to train the pilot in instrument flying, and was evidently very effective in achieving this. George called it...

...one of those $10,000 airplanes which stays hitched to the cement floor in a nice warm room It is the first step in learning to fly by instruments without seeing the ground or anything. The Link reacts just like an airplane + the cockpit looks just like a Basic or an Advanced trainer. When we get to Basic, we will actually fly "under the hood," but, not until after we receive quite a number of hours of Link "hood" instruction.

One of the student officers, a Lt. Randall, landed in a corn field, out of gas, so he thought! One tank was empty, but the other one was completely filled. You can imagine what they told him about that. Another boy took out a fence, trying to make an "under" in his stage landings at Peel Field. In so doing, he split the center section of the ship, + bent the propeller. Things like that happen every day. But, it is carelessness that exists close to the ground, when land appears imminent that causes most of the trouble. (11/5/43)

George passed a forty hour check with the only criticism being that he was "a little rough on the controls" and that he should try to "smooth up" a little. He was encouraged a little by his scores and feedback, although Lonstrup was quite stingy with compliments, as was part of his game plan.

Prior to the check-ride, I had an hour with Lonstrup. He all but boxed my ears. He wondered what I had been doing for the past 25 hours, up there. He was showing me a new maneuver, "lazy 8's." In this, a hard one, you seem to go all over the sky in the effort to do a climb, a steep turn + a dive in one coordinated maneuver. (11/8/43)

Helena was a welcome respite from the rigors of army regimentation, with fewer parades, lighter PT, and hardly a mention of inspections. George likened it to the Grove City episode as a time in the army away from the army. All indications were that Basic would be quite different in this respect. At the half-way point of thirty-one hours, George seemed to be making good progress and despite the ear boxing of the instructors, was on a sound trajectory for completion of Primary by early December. As mentioned earlier, George began to express his emerging faith more in his letters.

Thank you, Betty, for the letter + the prayer. I have put the prayer in my wallet, so it will follow me around. I guess there's nobody who can help you when you're up there alone, except the Blessed Virgin + God. Believe me, I thought more of that on my first solo rides than I do right now. That

is, perhaps, why you really need reminders, as you get into more advanced maneuvers. You get so confident or "hot," as they say, that nothing can happen, yet it does. (11/10/43)

I am getting more confidence, now. That is what I have been lacking. I have noticed that Lonstrup does not chew quite so much; so, I think I am doing a little better. Pretty soon, I should be getting a check ride, with an army officer. They have to ride each one of us once, before we leave here. That is just another ride that you have to worry about. But, I'm not afraid to ride with the army! (11/11/43)

On November 12, George received a visit from his brother Bill ("Junior"). It was only four hours and that was partly curtailed because the captain wanted George to still go to his class. While George was rather unhappy about that, the situation was eased some because the commanding officer offered to have Junior flown to Memphis in the "blue and gold basic trainer" which was available for the officers.

I finally gave him to understand that I did not want to play

There are getting to be quite a number of "hot pilots," now as some of the boys are getting over 40 hours. One fellow came up to me, this morning, + motioned me to follow him. He did snap-rolls + slow rolls, things which no one has had, yet. But I tried to get away from him, fearing that somebody might be checking up. I finally gave him to understand that I did not want to play, so he gave up.

Well, I'm a trifle tired, so I'll begin to head for bed, now. I have 36 hours, as of tonight. After I get 40 hours, I will begin to get acrobatic maneuvers. The instructors can't wait to get started on that, for they like to play around, + it is somewhat of a relief for them, I suppose. (11/12/43)

George discovered a place to get a good steak dinner in Helena, so he and one or more of his buddies would go there periodically. This was unusual, as he stated, because it seemed that fried chicken was the staple at almost every meal in Arkansas.

I forgot to mention that I was glad to receive those hockey notices. If you happen to remember once in a while, don't bother always, slip the hockey clippings into an envelope. (11/14/43)

Bob Burn's Grandpa Snazzy's home

I do not feel too good about things tonight, since I made a mess of my crosswind landings today. I simply could not get the darned plane onto the ground. To make it worse, it was a supervised stage + the instructor stood on the ground watching the entire procedure. He really gave me an earful when I finally did complete my six landings.

Part of the time, I was using a typical Arkansas cotton picker's shack as a pylon. It might have been *Bob Burn's Grandpa Snazzy's home for all I know. At any rate, the occupants were standing out in the yard wondering what I was doing + what I was up to. All the roads are straight, dirt roads, used only by horse or mule drawn vehicles. (11/16/43)

*Bob Burns was a radio comedian known for folksy southern humor. *Grandpa Snazzy* was one of his main characters. Burns, of Van Buren, Arkansas, produced a daily program for the Armed Forces Radio during World War II.[11]

As the boys got more and more air time, three hours or more a day, the strain on them mounted. These were not just joy rides but drill sessions in which complicated, exacting maneuvers were practiced.

This is Wednesday, open-post night for 44D; yet, I'd be willing to wager that none of the boys have gone much farther than the guard's gate! Why? Simply, it is because they are all pretty tired. This business of having between 2 + 3 hours every day exacts quite a strain on the old constitution.

I didn't do very well; but, I didn't care; for I had not had a rest between rides, so I was about at wits end. He (Lonstrup) didn't yell much, so it wasn't too bad. I believe that he was planning to do some acrobatics today, only a directive was announced just before we started that spins + acrobatics would be taboo until further notice. Evidently they are investigating the

causes of accidents resulting from improper or unreliable actions of the PT-23s in maneuvers like spins and acrobatics. I understand that over 30% of class 44D has been eliminated at Clarksdale, already. (11/17/43)

Instructors, Lonstrup particularly, were unhappy about the curtailment of acrobatics. The instructors lived for the last twenty hours of instruction when they could have a little fun.

Today, I had my longest stretch of flying, 3 hrs. 11 minutes. Believe me, I was plenty tired when I wheeled into traffic at 5:30 + got in the midst of the "rat-race" which takes place when everybody is trying to land at the same time, just at 5:30. I used to be afraid; but now it does not bother me to have all those planes zooming around me. I didn't give Lonstrup a very good ride, today, so he says. I simply could not do a thing correctly. He wondered what was wrong with me; yet, I felt as if I was doing something right, at least, up there. I imagine that he is a bit irritable because of having to practice the same things all the time without anything new to teach us. I have at least gotten to the point where I can make good landings every time, now. As of tonight, I have 50 hours in the book. (11/19/43)

The last ten days of November were a rush to get the remainder of each cadet's sixty-five hours of flying time in. The men were in the air for several hours each day. George received a surprise visit from Miss Smith the weekend of the twentieth. He treated her well, providing some nice meals and companionship, but detected a strangeness in her behavior. George was exhausted and barely able to be civil. He really felt that Smitty's visit was an intrusion, and was miffed when she began to act as if George were pursuing her rather than the reverse. He was puzzled as to why she had come so far to see him, then acted a bit stand-offish.

Lonstrup began prepping his student to fly the BT-13A that he would be flying in Basic. Still, his future was uncertain. He was getting quite anxious about his army check-ride, which seemed elusive.

In other words, he was giving me a few pointers to get firmly into my mind regarding the airplanes which we will be flying in a couple of weeks; - if! (11/21/43)

I was feeling like a real flier, for a change

Well, I had my first thrill in flying today. For, we had our so-called supervised cross-country flight. We all taxied out together + warmed up the engines together, prior to take-off. Then, we took off in numerical order, with each ship following as the preceding one left the ground. According to plan, we flew out of the traffic pattern + climbed to 2000' on our own initiative. Then, we took up formation, north of the field, + headed up the ridge for Forest City. Believe me, it was no easy matter to find the right planes, because several formations were making up at the same time. However, Muller + I were close together when we finally spotted 3 planes headed north + took a gamble that it was them. So, with Muller after me, I pushed the throttle full-ahead, pushed the nose down a bit + "opened her up." In that stretch I got my ship up to 130 mph. on the level. We seemed to pick up a fairly good formation at the beginning, because none of the pre-assigned signals were forthcoming from the lead ship. By the time we hit Marianna, we were all getting on to the knack of flying formation. By this time, I was feeling like a real flier, for a change, even though we were only flying straight + level. I kept an eagle eye on Lonstrup. What do you suppose he did! Something that is a great temptation but is not in the book. He hoisted his nose up, rolled over on his back, + "peeled-off," just like a fighter plane. Then, he headed straight down with full throttle + "buzzed" Forest City at about 700 feet.

Lonstrup was proud of our formation he said, + hoped we did as good on return. You see, the instructors get a kick out of seeing their boys up there, formed around them like little chickens. I imagine that they feel that at least they have changed us from dumb clucks to at least the point where we can get up there + get down. I got close enough to see Lonstrup sitting up there + looking back around him. I imagine that he got quite a kick out of it. For once, he acted like a human rather than a merciless instructor.

Tomorrow, we will go solo, + not in formation. The object will be to get a little elementary navigation + flying with a compass, checkpoints + a watch. One thing is for sure, everybody is going to buzz Forest City + make the cotton pickers run for cover. What fun! (11/22/43)

When I got to Brinkley, I followed my instructions which were to circle the field, at 500 feet, + dip the wing so that they could get the number of the airplane. However, I got in a little fun by letting down to the field with a full-power dive which brought the old air speed right up to the red line on the glass. Then I climbed up over the town of Brinkley + started my 62o heading for Forest City. When I got to Forest City, I noticed that the other boys were still with me, so we each made shallow dives + made a turn on to the 168o heading for Helena. (11/23/43)

At one point, George detected that the formation was on the wrong side of a town, so he made a correction, and the other boys followed him. He had begun to demonstrate his ability as a leader in the air. He thoroughly involved the cross-country runs that validated his navigation skills.

Thanksgiving was recognized on post although they did get the cadets in the air during the morning hours. George had received a fabulous package from home with lots of traditional treats. He remarked to Ma, in jest, that she had done a good job of making him homesick. He expressed abundant gratitude for his mother and all her tender care for him with packages, letters, and moral support.

The day before Thanksgiving, Don Lonstrup was still yelling, demanding what George called perfection. Thanksgiving came, and the HAT staff did it's best to provide some holiday spirit. They served a sit-down dinner, and George admitted it came close to being like home, absent only Ma's cooking. He hitchhiked to town for a movie, went bowling, and then stopped at the St. Mary's Church. The church was dark, which was a new experience for George. It was also empty, but he took satisfaction in choosing not to follow the crowds, taking instead a unique path. He lit a candle for Ma and then headed back to base to write letters.

The army check-ride was still hanging over George, but days passed without it happening. As the last days at Helena rolled along, George was able to have some candid conversation with Lonstrup about his instructional philosophy.

Ultimately + in a round-about fashion, he got around to admitting that his previous class (44B) was 3 times worse than we have been. He did not say that we were 3 times as good; but, he said that they were 3 times as bad. So, that did not make us feel too bad. (11/26/43)

I had the first hour with Lonstrup, and he gave me a little diversion by climbing all over + around + in + out of one of those big white puffy cloud banks. It is really beautiful up there. We climbed right up the edge of the mass + it is really a temptation to keep going around the clouds, although it is very dangerous when there is such a number of planes around. (11/29/43)

Notwithstanding the joyride, Don got back to niggling when they started to work. George's interpretation of this was that with the check-ride still looming, he had to keep the cadet on edge, restraining his confidence so that he would not blow the check run. For the first time, George wrote that it was "boring" running the same maneuvers over and over. Rumors about Basic began to fly, which always happened when a change was pending. Lonstrup's boys bought him a nice flight bag for thirty dollars, as it was tradition to give a gift to the instructor.

At last, George was called for his army check-ride on November 30. He was called to report to the flight line and Lt. Smith in ship No. 119 for this all-crucial test. Expecting Smith to be more exacting than Lonstrup, the cadet braced himself and "poured on the coal." The test involved a forced landing and many of the maneuvers that had been part of the daily training. After twenty minutes with only sparse comments, the officer took the plane down, power-driving into traffic in a most unconventional manner. Tense, and knowing that the lieutenant had a reputation for being a "hard boy to pass," it was a huge relief to George to

hear the words from Lt. Smith, "Your flying is all right, and I like the way you use those rudders. You are a little rough on the controls, so if you smoothen up, you'll be okay." When the officer asked George what he would like to fly, George told him, "Light bombers, I think." The officer remarked that if George continued to use the rudders as he did, he would be all right.

That 20 minute ride was worth every bit of it

I told him that Lonstrup had been yelling, "Rudder! Rudder! Rudder! Rudder!" for 9 weeks. To that, he smiled. You see, there is a great deal of jealousy between the army + the civilians around here. So when all is said and done, the Lt. was about 1,000 times easier to please than the exacting instructor which we have had. And, I lost no time in telling Lonstrup, who was pleased. He said, "Remember, the first day you got here, I yelled 'Rudder!' + I haven't stopped yet." Yes, this has been quite a struggle and some of the tongue lashings of Lonstrup's have been almost unbearable + he has not let up yet. But, that 20 minute ride was worth every bit of it, believe me. I have never doubted for a minute Lonstrup's ability + knowledge of what's expected of us; but, I guess he tries to make us perfect, with the knowledge that we will only be ½ as good on a check-ride. I'm here to say that I never remember being yelled at, at any given time by you, as I have been on practically every ride with Lonstrup.

There is a graduation dance on Saturday; but, I doubt if I'll go. If I go, it will be "solo." No, I didn't meet a girl in this town! (11/30/43)

On December 1, George completed his sixty-five hours required to complete Primary. With his army check ride behind him, he was relaxed and enjoying flying. When he went up that day, Lonstrup put George in the front seat, where the instructor usually sat, in order to accustom him to the protocol he would experience in Basic. After this, Lonstrup left the cadet to solo for thirty minutes to hit the big "6-5." Don had finished his duties with 44D and wasted no time getting ready to leave on a six-day vacation at home. Before the two men parted, Don spoke openly to George about his instruction tactics, which was important for

the latter to have a sense of closure after what he referred to in the same letter as "65 hours of hell."

"Now you know!"

So, we talked about vital parts of his instruction, while waiting for everybody to get in. I asked him if he would "chew" so much if he thought a boy was not going to make it. He said, "Definitely, no!" He did say that he has had boys who could not take it + asked for a change in instruction. Then, he admitted that he had never told us once, that we ever did a maneuver properly. He always told us when we were doing bad; but, he figured that we would decide the rest for ourselves. Remember when we had to ask for mercy back around solo time? Today, he said that he recalls every little incident that pertains to our psychology + his impressions on us. He knows our every thought + he knows that he got us so rattled that we could not do a thing properly. About that incident, he said he knew we wanted to fly really, when we asked him to stop chewing so that we could do our best. So, he said, "I really lit into you guys + did not let you know how you were doing, did I?" Evidently, this man understood us perfectly + what we were thinking about him. For, his analysis of us jibed with ours of him.

His philosophy, to summarize, has been this; if you can do it as well as you are supposed to, then you can do it better than that. So, he did not stop with what the check-riders expected; but, he continued to give us fine points. Consequently, my check-rides were a joke in comparison to how difficult it was to please him. Believe me, the 65 hours of hell was worth that 20 minute ride with the army, yesterday! Then, before he left, we gave him the furlough bag which pleased him no end. He said he needed just that + would have Class 44D engraved right on the top. He was all smiles then, as he proceeded to say good-bye. With that, he broke down with this: "You boys are the finest quality I have ever had + this is the first time that I ever put my original 5 men all the way through. For that, I am mighty proud." As he walked away, he said, "Now you know!"

This man may be the means of a flying career for us and, I cannot help but respect him for that fierce battle which he helped us through. That battle was purely + simply – convincing ourselves that we could do

it. He made us promise to write to him + said that he would kick the first man who did not write, "right in the ---." You can bet that I'll write, if I go along okay. For, you owe it all to your Primary instructors. He also said, as he parted, "There's no excuse for any of you washing out!" With that, he grabbed his present + started for his vacation, leaving us smiling for the first time, after him. (12/1/43)

So ended the drama of Primary Flight Training, almost. A rumor began circulating that thirty percent of each Primary school had to be delayed advancing because of overcrowding at Basic schools. The rumor shortly became an edict. Those so delayed would receive additional work and would thus be stronger to begin Basic, as the rationale went. So the officers picked seventy-five men to be delayed a month based on various performance criteria. Once more, tensions rose as the men of 44D awaited the verdict on whether or not they would be delayed.

G.H.

Then, everybody got on the edge of their chairs as Captain Parker read the lists of men who would ship. First, he read off 10 men who are going to Greenville, Miss.; then, he read off the 17 names of boys who are going to Newport, Ark.; then, he read off the Walnut Ridge list, as the boys began to groan. Hardly a breath was taken as the list was read, minus many of the familiar names. When he read "Neilson," I sounded off, "Which one, sir?" "G.H." was the reply. So, I settled back in my chair, assured that I was moving on. (12/2/43)

Though elated about advancing, George wrote with sadness about many of the Grove City boys who would be split off from the class, noting that they were almost in tears as the group had been together since Atlantic City. He did report, however, that Randy Martin, Art Nebel, Jack Martin, Herb Nuber, Jim Nolan, and Earl Nelson were also going to Walnut Ridge with him. Two of Lonstrup's five boys were reverted, which upset Neilson, believing the army did not consult the instructors on the deal.

How do I feel? Well, after the struggle with "Lonnie," I can't help but feel that maybe I accomplished a little. But, I also believe that maybe the other side of the fence may be rosy, too. I'll go right into Basic + begin that strain, just as I stand, now. These other boys will get 30 hours in which to prepare themselves for the same step. However, I feel as they do; I would rather take my chances than lose a month! (12/2/43)

You see, when we go to Basic, it will be goodbye to nice food + the old "G.I." mess, once more. For W.R. is an army air field, cut + dry! (12/2/43)

Another bit on Lonstrup's teaching, he told Nebel that he always would like to keep us on the brink of despair, while flying dual. But, he knew that if we were despaired of getting anywhere he was not doing a good job. He just wanted us to be fighting mad, I guess. So, the more I think, the more I believe that Lonstrup was an unusual man! But, I'm not sorry for it, right now. (12/2/43)

In his last letter from Helena on Sunday, December 6, George recounted the final festivities of the previous day, which were rowdy as expected when men released weeks of strain and tension in the customary manner.

It seems as if the shouting is just about over now. We will be leaving around noontime tomorrow, I expect. The festivities, so to speak, ended with the formal "brawl," at the "exclusive" (ahem) roadhouse which is politely termed the 'Lotus Club.'

I spent Saturday evening in town, debating the pros + cons of putting in an appearance at the affair which I knew would be a free-for-all, at best. I never saw so many pie-eyed people under one roof, in all my life. There were officers, cadets, enlisted men and instructors there. To begin with, it was so crowded that nobody could have danced if they had been able to. Then, there was the added danger of tripping over the heaps of bottles and glasses that served as decorations for the affair. I went there at 12 o'clock on my way home from town. I had my Saturday night steak dinner, as a sort of celebration for having finished Primary, intact. (12/5/43)

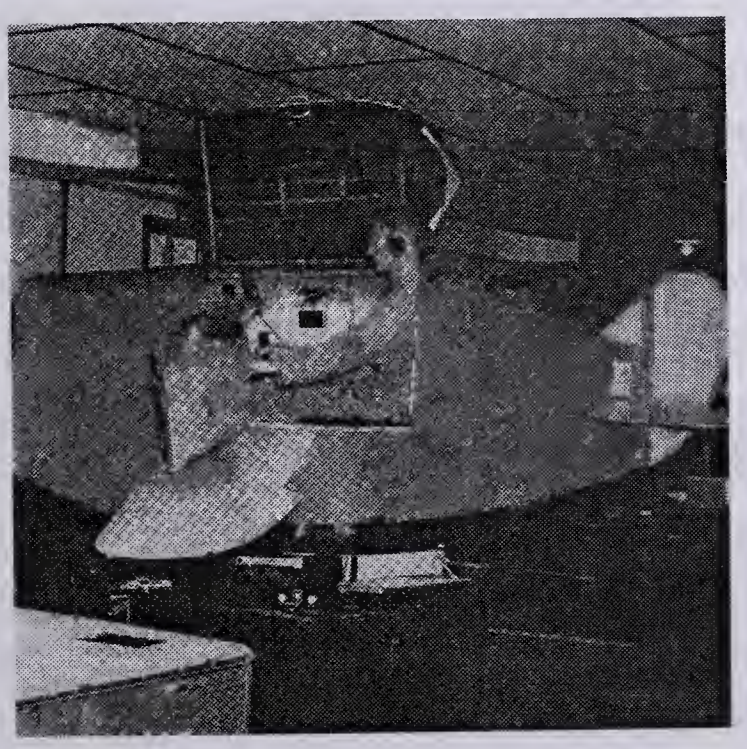
Earlier in the afternoon, the army held a graduation ceremony. Diplomas were awarded and the Helena High School Band played. Army officers buzzed the scene in PT-23s doing a few acrobatics. Then, it was off to town for the unofficial celebration. After a couple of more nice chicken dinners, Neilson's days at Helena Aero Tech came to an end.

Primary flight training instructor Don Lonstrup
(first row center) and his flight students
including air cadet Neilson (first row left)

Neilson by PT-23 at Primary FT, Helena
Aero Tech, Helena, Arkansas

Don Lonstrup, Primary flight trainer
from Union Grove, Wisconsin

George in cockpit of PT 23
trainer, Helena Aero Tech



The Link trainer flight simulator

Chapter 9

Basic Flight Training

Walnut Ridge Army Air Field
Walnut Ridge, Arkansas

The Turning Point in the Skies over Europe

Throughout 1943, the Allied air campaign against Nazi Germany and its conquered states was going poorly. In short, the United States and Britain were losing. Three air battles in the fall underscored this conclusion. The first was the dual Regensburg-Schweinfurt mission on August 17, in which sixty bombers were lost over southeastern Germany, and another seventeen crash-landed before arriving back at their bases in England. This meant over six hundred casualties. The second was on September 6 in a debacle at Stuttgart, where another ball-bearing plant was the target. A thick blanket of clouds kept the bombers from finding their targets, and 230 of the 338 fortresses left the target area without dropping their bombs on it. In such cases, the bombs are released on "opportunity targets," locations not in the plan but where the crew believed something could be accomplished. Forty-five crews were lost without much gained. The third battle was on October 14, which came to be known as Black Thursday. The target was again the ball-bearing factories in Schweinfurt. Miller[1] described it this way:

> Black Thursday was the greatest air engagement up to that time—not just a raid but a titanic struggle between two large and murderous air armies, one with 229 bombers and the other with over 300 fighters. The battle line extended for over 800 miles and the action was continuous for

> three hours and fourteen minutes. Only thirty-three American bombers landed without battle damage, and there were 642 casualties among the 2,900 crewmen, over 18 percent of the force.

The price for the German Luftwaffe was over one hundred fighters lost or destroyed. Black Thursday was a moral defeat for the Allied airmen. Although 67 percent of Schweinfurt's ball-bearing production was disabled, German industry's ability to bounce back enabled the recovery of this loss in a matter of months. Fortunately, the same was true of American aircraft production. What Germany had not reckoned with was the nearly inexhaustible strength of the American industrial establishment and its capacity to produce aircraft and other military hardware. In the end, it was the enormity of America's industrial might that caused the Allied forces to prevail.[2]

By the fall of 1943, the USAAF command was beginning to realize that the reckless course they were on could not continue. The stoic allegiance to daylight bombing was beginning to waver. The greatest problem the American heavies faced was the lack of fighter support in the combat zones. The Thunderbolts and Lightnings simply did not have the range to reach the targets inside the German Reich. Missions represented ever-deeper penetration of Axis territory. The command knew that the loss rates sustained in late 1943 could not continue, for neither the American public nor the fliers would continue to accept such heavy losses (64 percent of the crews) without some kind of mutiny.[3] The AAF leadership knew that the Luftwaffe had to be destroyed before an assault on the Atlantic Wall was possible. The troop buildup in England in preparation for the invasion of France was already underway, and the massive landings that would later become known as D-Day were scheduled with the highest level of secrecy for May 1944. The arrival of hundreds of thousands of US servicemen in England in the months prior to D-Day has been referred to as the "American invasion of England."[4]

Five developments in late 1943 and early 1944 marked a turning in the fortunes of the air war. First, experimental use of radar to locate bombing targets in overcast skies was quite promising. This "radar bombing" or "blind bombing," though still imprecise, opened up many more days when missions could fly, particularly from October to March when most of north-central Europe was socked in haze and clouds. Secondly, auxiliary "drop" fuel tanks were added to the wings of fighter aircraft, extending their range. Thirdly, the successful advance of Allied forces up through the lower *boot* of Italy in the final months of 1943 secured territory that made possible the relocation of units of the Fifteenth AAF in Africa to Foggia on the Adriatic (east) coast. From there, bombers could reach southern and eastern points of the Reich that were out of range of the England-based Eighth AAF. Fourth, the new Eighth AF commander, the famed James Doolittle who replaced the more cautious Ira C. Eaker in January of 1944, switched from defensive air combat to offensive. American fighters began to engage the German defenders before the bombers arrived at the fight. Luftwaffe commander Hermann Goering, in turn, sent his fighters to attack the Fortresses (which the Germans called "the Boeings") long before they reached their targets. With coastal radar in northwest France, the Germans were able to track the approaching fleets of bombers from the time they took off in East Anglia. Finally, and perhaps most decisively, was the AAF's discovery of the P-51 "Mustang" as a daunting fighter. Designed by a German immigrant originally for the British, the Mustang that eventually proved itself a game changer was a hybrid of the original design and the Rolls-Royce's Merlin 61. As Miller[5] described the engineering brainchild,

> The modification transformed the plane into a sensational high altitude aircraft: a small, streamlined beauty that was faster, lighter, and more nimble than anything in the Nazi arsenal. Suddenly the American Air Force became interested, ordering 2,200 of the British American

hybrids from North American Aviation in late 1942-not nearly enough, but a start.

With eighty-five-gallon drop tanks, the Mustang could fly all the way to Berlin and back. It took down on average three German aircraft for every one of its kind shot down. The Mustang was the key card in the deadly poker game in Europe. Slowly, as a critical number of the planes arrived, the goal of air superiority, crucial to a successful execution of Operation Overlord (the D-Day invasion), became achievable.[6]

BASIC FLYING SCHOOL, Walnut Ridge, AK Air Force Base

In early [December], I got on a dirty train, again, this time for a shorter ride, to the small town of Walnut Ridge. As fall grew longer and winter began to approach, Walnut Ridge appeared as a foreboding little, uninteresting place. The base appeared even less interesting—temporary in construction, consisting of crudely built, tarpaper-covered barracks and, in fact, all the buildings were tarpaper-covered wooden buildings. The barracks had coal-fired, pot-bellied stoves for heat. In general, the atmosphere at the base was gloomy.

This was the so-called "Basic" stage. We were programmed to fly in a heavier craft, the BT-13, made by Vultee Aircraft Co. The plane had a canopy-enclosed cockpit, lights, radios and additional navigation instruments. With these additional features, we would thus be exposed to a few more of the complexities of flying.

Generally, the daily sequence was the same as at Primary School, with half the daily time spent on the flight line and half at ground school. My flight instructor, at the beginning, was 2nd Lt. *Shannon D. Bigelow, a "deep Southerner" from South Carolina. From his mannerisms, it was clear that he was a descendant of the "Rebels" [and] felt at ease in being antipathetic towards "Yankees," if it suited his pleasure. It is noteworthy that at the time of WWII, discussions relating the various differences between "Yankees" and "Rebels" were common, though mostly humorous.

In my first 4 to 5 hours with Lt. Bigelow, I reaped a lot of discouragement. He seemed to be a bitter person, who had spent the nights before his flight-training assignments drinking heavily, and then suffering hangover problems while he was instructing his students. Nothing I did would satisfy him. This led me to a very pessimistic outlook, amidst the gloom and dampness of Walnut Ridge. My flights with Lt. Bigelow, mainly resulting in futility, led to the biggest crisis of my flying career, even including the combat activities that would follow. Lt. Bigelow put me up for a "check" ride with the squadron commander, to determine whether I should be allowed to continue, or be eliminated. The squadron commander, Lt. Malcolm B. Edens, turned out also to be a *Rebel* and also from South Carolina, seemingly with the same antipathy towards "Yankees." Being pessimistic as he greeted me for the check ride, we were scheduled on a cold, gloomy, icy day. Psychologically, I was fighting a defeatist attitude, even before the flight. This attitude led me to an observation that Lt. Edens would just as soon wash me out. Consequently, I was rattled as I went through the procedures, to take off. I did not wait long enough for the engine to warm up before leaving the ramp to head for the runway for take-off. After I did my traffic pattern for landing, I apparently did not satisfy Lt. Edens for one more step [was added]—the "elimination ride" with the Commander of the entire training group, Captain Robert Ficke. This would be "it", in or out, based on this "final" ride.

After a few grim days of waiting, the day came. Captain Ficke approached me, gently, and put me at ease with respect to the proposed flight. Somehow, I felt comfortable with myself and relaxed as I got into the plane with him. When we got into the air, I managed to do everything he asked, correctly, following his instructions as we did various maneuvers. Finally, we climbed to 8,000 feet, where he asked me to do a "tailspin," a rather violent maneuver in the BT-13 (or in any plane), which was known to be tricky by some of the other trainees. I did it without fear and apprehension, and it worked out, accurately. The "lesson" went smoothly, including proper entry into the traffic pattern and a

good landing. As he stepped out of the plane, Captain Ficke said that Lt. Joe Bach would "solo" me. After this, my career was never threatened, in terms of the judgment of the training people as to whether I could do the job. There were no more crises as to whether I should be allowed to progress. (Occasionally, if they could have looked into my head, they might have thought differently.)

There were other, more palatable flights, amidst the dismal atmosphere of Walnut Ridge. One of the enjoyable flying activities was "night flying." My first sojourn into the night-time sky was like entering a new world. At night, everything looks different. Lights on the ground look exaggerated as to their size. A light on the street or on the front porch of a house, is clearly visible from the air. It is difficult to determine your location by comparing the sizes of cities or towns, since smaller towns look disproportionately larger, at night. Distances between locations on the ground become distorted and tend to look closer than they actually are. All of these relationships, plus the sight of aircraft lights circling in the sky, made for a new pattern of things which had to be re-measured in the mind's eye as compared to daytime relationships of the same things. Riding along with an instructor, for orientation, provided the mother hen or "hand holding" protection that made these first night-time flights satisfying, suggesting progress and vital "learning" in the challenge of becoming a pilot. However, the first trips up, solo, seemed to provide a reaction of being dazzled by all these new elements. After four or five flights, my initial concerns, and fears, transformed into pleasant, satisfying experiences.

After my first solo trip, at Basic, my morale never reached the depths that it had been to. So, as the new phases of training unfolded, like pages in a book, I began to take them in stride. I was not yet fully confident; but, I was at least positive about things that were unfolding, with the sense that I could probably succeed. It dawned on me that the challenge was to reach out beyond my capabilities, as I understood (or didn't understand) them, and to achieve the requirements of the various phases of flight training. I got support for my courage from the undercurrent impression that was rampant amongst the trainees that if you would be

eliminated, you would be sent to an activity, in the service, where the opportunities to advance would be nonexistent. The example commonly expressed was that, if eliminated, you would be sent to "cooks and bakers school" or possibly some other form of drudgery activity.

Continuing new challenges, at Basic, brought along the first cross-country flight, meaning a trip for 300 miles, away from the training area near the base, where visual navigation including maps would be necessary to the success of the mission. This would involve sighting the visual landmarks, briefed for the route, and cross-checking them with the maps provided for the trip. In preparation for this first cross-country, we did have excellent ground school training. My instructor, for example, had been the navigator for the America's Cup yacht "Rainbow" that raced against the British yacht "Endeavour II," and defeated it, off Newport, RI, in 1937.

However, when the day for this first cross-country came, in early January of 1944, on a Sunday at noontime, there was a covering of snow over the entire route, which had occurred the night before, but about which there had been no discussion in ground school. The snow caused all the landmarks that were to guide our travel to either be not visible, or appear distorted. Without any opportunity to have these visual distortions reconciled, each plane, in turn set out on a triangular course from Walnut Ridge, north to a small town called Advance, in Missouri, then across the Mississippi River to Jackson, Tennessee, where we were instructed to fly over the field, call into a control plane, then return to Walnut Ridge, approximately a 300 mile trip.

As soon as I got my plane into the air, and after turning to the proper heading to go to Advance, I felt as if I was lost. The appearance of the snow, plus my inexperience, dazzled me. Immediately, I began grappling with the map, in a valiant effort to reconcile landmarks. It seemed impossible. Fear, concern and concentration all began to converge in my mind. The first objective was to get to Advance and make a landing. Then, the plan called for taking-off in response to an officer in a control plane on the

ground. It seemed like a long trip, this first leg, because I had trouble recognizing anything en route and I barely "stumbled" into Advance. Luckily, I spotted the field, as I flew directly over it. I was able to make a good landing then takeoff for Jackson, Tennessee. I was flying at 4,000 ft. An experienced pilot would have easily identified the point along the Mississippi River where I flew over. However, I could not reconcile my inexperience, my lack of concentration to identify the location on the bank of the river, or my inability to relate to the map in my hands. Thus, I really felt lost as I passed over the river. Actually, the twists and turns that the river makes are amongst the easiest things to identify on a map, to determine location. I kept going, on the heading, on the compass, that was assigned to reach Jackson. But, I never knew for sure, exactly when, or if I got to the Jackson area. I made radio calls to the officer on the ground, in the control plane. He knew that I did not know where I was. I [se]nsed that I was in the Jackson area and turned the plane in 3 or 4 circles because the time that it was supposed to take to go from Advance, MO to Jackson had elapsed. I was circling amongst training planes like mine [that] were obviously from a base somewhere near Jackson.

Concern, lonesomeness and panic began to overtake what little judgment I was able to apply. As an expression of panic, on one occasion, I opened up the cockpit canopy, pointed to a map in my hand, hoping to attract the attention of a nearby plane, by shaking my head and gesturing and pointing towards my map. There would be no way for anyone to communicate to me, if they understood what I was getting at. Hindsight illustrates how ridiculous this was. How could he understand what I was trying to ask for? This point of panic and desperation is high on my list of vivid situations that "reaching-out" in my unknown world of learning to fly brought me to. Finally, the officer in the control plane, on the ground, either identified me up there or heard me calling him enough times, called to me to get on course back to Walnut Ridge. It had not been part of the plan to land at Jackson; so, now I headed for the final leg of the triangular trip. I never did identify Jackson because I

was not able to focus on the exact requirements of navigating by ground landmarks.

As I headed towards Walnut Ridge, I still was not certain where I was. But, as I looked ahead 50 miles, I could see the Mississippi River winding its way across the horizon. I knew that there would be no excuse for not finding where I was by the time the plane crossed the river. For the river, and its crooks and bends are clearly outlined on the map. Yet for the 15-20 minutes it took to get to the river, it seemed impossible that I would find out where I was. Finally, as I crossed the river, I identified where I was, I thought, although I believe that I double-checked the landmarks, with the map, at least 10 times before I believed it. When I finally settled down and reconciled my mind that I could settle for "seeing-is-believing," a great feeling of exhilaration set in. My senses seemed to sharpen and my confidence shot up. Actually, "I knew where I was," practically for the first time all afternoon, with real certainty. From there, the ride back to Walnut Ridge was pleasurable—victory.

When I landed, I felt that I might be questioned for being a little late; but, not so. For I learned that 3 of the planes in the expedition had not made it back; for, they had gotten lost. However, they did make it safely to a base at Malden, Missouri. So, it was a great experience. The feeling of "greatness" came late in the day, primarily when I learned that others had worse experiences.

Instead, because it was my first cross-country and because snow had distorted the navigation job, I did a lot of learning in a hurry. I never really got lost, after that. I always kept in mind, at least roughly, where I was, even later when on the bombing missions we had navigators aboard. I had realized, without incident, how futile it was to be lost. I had a chance to come face-to-face with the catastrophe possibilities that might have developed. And, in the flying profession, there is never an excuse for being lost. Nobody ever sympathizes with you.

Other experiences at Basic Flying School, involved doing aerobatics—chandelles, loops, tailspins, snap rolls, slow rolls. These maneuvers were preparatory to becoming single-engine,

or "fighter" pilots. I did them as assigned; but, I did not feel comfortable with them. The BT-13 airplane was often referred to as the "Vultee Vibrator," because it was noisy. It was a low-winged plane, with a front seat for the pilot and a rear seat for the passenger or instructor.

The "tailspin" in which you cut back the power, nose the plane sharply upward until it stalls, then its nose drops straight through the horizon and the plane spins wildly, out of control straight towards the ground, is always a major challenge to a pilot-trainee. It takes good self-control, as well as coordination of the hands and feet to bring the plane under control. Actually, as the plane heads towards the ground it is necessary to pop the control stick (often called the "joy" stick) abruptly forward as you push the rudder control in the opposite direction of the spin. Then, as the stick controls the ailerons, the plane stops spinning. At this point, you pull the stick back to bring the nose of the plane up to the horizon and level it off, while applying power from the throttle. It is, basically, a scary maneuver for any pilot; but, it tests the "mettle" of the student pilot. There was a fear that with the BT-13, if you over-corrected with the flight controls, in bringing the plane out of a spin, the plane would quickly switch to a tighter spin in the opposite direction and thus make it a more dangerous challenge to bring it out of the spin, since you would, by this time, be very close to the ground, depending upon what altitude the original maneuver was started from. Actually, some trainees lost their lives by failing to do tailspins correctly.

The only death that did occur during my training experience happened to a Frank Moravic, who apparently did not get his plane to recover from a spin, at Walnut Ridge.

While the weather and environment at Walnut Ridge had been unpleasant, it did provide the turn-around, or the beginning of my positive experiences in flying, leading to my ultimate graduation from Advanced School. Ground school which was always ½ of each day became more stimulating, as we began to study navigation and get some time in the "Link" trainer. The Link, developed by an engineer at Binghamton, NY, made it possible to simulate actual

flying in the air while sitting in a small simulator, attached to the floor of a comfortable building. This was used primarily to get us used to flying blind, or by instruments, at the same time avoiding the waste of trial-and-error air time in a real plane. The effort of instruction in ground school was to make sure you learned and passed the tests, not to see if they could eliminate you.

Finally, in early February, we had a banquet in the mess hall with a word of encouragement from the Lt. Colonel in charge of the base. I recall that as some of us received orders to be transferred to the Advanced Training School at Blytheville, Arkansas, 150 miles to the northeast, a chant broke out: "Please don't send my son to Blytheville, a dying mother said, I'd rather see him dead." This was an undeserved criticism, since most all bases were not to be considered as country clubs, especially in Arkansas. Not all of us from Walnut Ridge were assigned to Blytheville, which was a school for twin-engine training for those who would eventually be on bombers. Some of the group were assigned to Spence Field, Georgia and other schools where single engine planes were used (the famous AT-6), in preparation for being sent on to fighter plane assignments. (G.H.N., 1991)[7]
*pseudo name

As has been the case with previous transfers, Cadet Neilson left Primary flight school on a crest of optimism after successfully completing that phase of pilot training. Soon after arriving at the new base, optimism melted away, and discouragement followed. Traveling about two hundred miles northwest of Helena on another filthy "G.I. Express" train, a sharp contrast with the country club atmosphere at Helena Aero Tech greeted the cadet on arrival at his Basic Flight Training base. Walnut Ridge was a hastily erected and austerely furnished camp of tarpaper buildings. The buildings were heated with potbellied coal stoves, which were most inadequate for the impending winter weather. The damp, overcast December weather of Arkansas did nothing to alleviate the dismal scene that George descended on that December 8.

Yes, I'm at Walnut Ridge and no I'm not having a good time!

Yes, I'm at Walnut Ridge + no I'm not having a good time! As if I expected to anyhow. The hazy, foggy + damp weather which has curtailed flying in Arkansas for the last 10 days has continued right along; as a result, we have yet to see Walnut Ridge in the full light of day. When we do, I know that we will be sorry. However, I'm ready to face the living conditions about which we have heard for the last two months. If you recall the description of Nashville with the tarpaper barracks, outdoor latrine buildings, etc., that's Walnut Ridge too. If you recall the discipline of Maxwell Field, that's here too. About the mess hall, we only have to sit down + the colored enlisted men wait on us, just as if it were a restaurant.

Instead of helmet + goggles, as you would imagine, we got what you might call a leather hunting or ski cap, with a long bill. It is similar to one which Mr. Nichols wears ice boating (Junior or Betty would know). Then we got a pair of the best sun glasses there are, I guess. You see, we will be enclosed by a Plexiglas canopy, most of the time, so a helmet + goggles is not essential. Then, we received two jackets, one fur-lined and the other just a good leather jacket. Another feature was a nice pair of gabardine flying coveralls. They are made of almost the type of material which are in my mocha gabardine pants. They are supposed to be worn over our regular O.D. clothing. You can see that we are dressed more for hunting than for flying with such apparel.

You'll not see pictures of it in any posters

We had an orientation lecture in the chapel this evening, by both Catholic and Protestant chaplains. The Protestant wanted us to be certain that only 7/8, + not all, of the wild things we had heard about Walnut Ridge are true. I might add that it is pretty nearly the end of the world; + you'll not see pictures of it in any posters which Uncle Sam uses to inveigle boys into this training.

Tomorrow, we will meet our instructors, whoever they may be. I understand that most of them are young men who have recently completed their training. You can expect anything, again. This is the big jump from Primary to Basic. These are real airplanes; you have to use a thousand

different buttons and cranks to keep them in order. It should be fun starting this engine with an electric motor energizer. I have always wanted to do that.

We are living in with the class 44C men. There is one of them with one of us in each room (or partition) of the barracks. So, we, the underclass, tend the soft coal barracks stoves + sweep the floors, it seems. (12/7/43)

The weather was much colder than George expected for Arkansas. There were several days when the mercury dropped below zero. As of Dec. 7, there were 50 cadets in the hospital with the flu. The men who had to sleep more than 10 feet from the stove benefitted little from its heat. Inspections for "shaves and shoe shines" were more commonplace than at Helena, as Walnut Ridge was a military base unlike Helena Aero Tech, which was a civilian school.

As the inclement weather dragged on, Neilson became very anxious to get on with the flying program. Finally, George met the first of several instructors he would work under at W.R. He wrote a seemingly well informed assessment of a major difference between the instructors at Basic vs. those at Helena:

He's what you'd call a real Rebel

They are all a group of "hot pilots." In the first place, they are only instructors because they are assigned here; + in the second place, none of them give a hoot about instructing. At the same time, I guess they seem to realize that their job is to get us through, though. They seemed to take a little interest in acquainting themselves with us as we sat around + got a lot of directives in the ready room this afternoon. My instructor, Lt. Bigelow from North Carolina, is a typical looking wild, hot pilot, with his hat all banged up. He looks like the kind of fellow who does not care whether school keeps or not. Yet, he has been here as an instructor for 8 months. He has a deep-South twang in his voice + he's what you'd call a real rebel. Just in talking with him, I don't know what to expect, in the air. So, I'll reserve my judgments until I ride with him. (12/8/43)

George explained in minute detail the cockpit procedure which, to his relief, was written on a card inside the cockpit, averting the need to memorize it.

The commander said that if the cockpit check list flies out the window of a B-17, for example, it is good cause for the crew to bail out. That is how important the lists become, later on. No pilot can remember everything. Furthermore, in big planes, the crew chief is always there to tell the pilot just what has to be done with all the switches. So, you see, pilots of big bombers are not the masterminds that you think, ordinarily. It is the man who sits in a single engine fighter, who has to know the score. (12/8/43)

Long and spacious concrete runways which were cotton fields 14 months ago

Rain again today + cold, windy, raw. You'd think that we were on the seacoast or something. There has been a fog + mist all the time we've been here. That makes 9 days of it, down here.

Our second class was concerned with navigation. The instructor was formerly a navigator for Harry Nye, a yachtsman of Vanderbilt's type. He is a great guy for boats; and, he described how he navigated the Chicago Mackinac race across Lake Michigan, once. He told us all about how wind shifts threw his navigation off + his hunches astray, etc. I imagine he'll have more to say, later on. So, we actually have to learn to use gyro compass, radio, + maps here; or, it will be our own necks. But let's get into the airplane, first! That might be a good idea.

To give you another insight into Walnut Ridge's setup; it is one of those places which the Air Corps will simply burn down, rake over + forget about, after the war is over. The only permanent things are the long + spacious concrete runways which were cotton fields, 14 months ago. (12/9/43)

George explained that some flying schools are permanent, and remarked that recruiting pictures are taken at such places, remarking:

But, I guarantee that you'll never see a picture of Walnut Ridge! Don't worry about that. The only thing here which is like Gunter, is the array of B-13's. All the Basic schools have the same planes, the B-13 or the BT-15 (both alike). It just had to be our luck to get here. So, we won't worry about it too much, when things get going. It's not so bad, after all is said + done. But, I will say that facilities are not as good as at Nashville. However, W.R. has a good rating as a school, and that is what counts, I guess. So far as ever going anywhere, that's a laugh! It takes you hours, they say. (12/9/43)

In the mental battlefield of the armed services, one needs a way to make meaning of things, and letters served this purpose for Neilson. The dialog between the negative and the positive, the comical and the pathetic is illustrated here:

An oratorical masterpiece

It seems like they decided that we needed the exercise. Thus, the instructor (a sergeant) had us do about 2 miles of running through the ugly streets of the post, before allowing us to reenter our picturesque, artistically appointed "shacks" (Grrrrrrrr). Oh! But these lean-to's are a tribute to the G.I. carpenters who could have at least bent over the nails, even if they did not think to use less than 4" nails to drive a quarter inch plank. I know what they say, "This is war! This is the army!" etc.

After a catered dinner of oyster stew (sea sand + all), crackers, spaghetti, "stewed" potatoes and bread + butter, we started on our merry way to the flight line, with our flying clothes on but with rain coats over them, oddly enough.

In order to make some use of the day, they sent us to one of the engine repair shops, to listen to an oratorical masterpiece by a young Italian immigrant of a mechanic who attempted to describe some of the parts of the B.T., although his vocabulary was vastly inadequate. He started to show us the hydraulic mechanism of the steerable tail wheel. As he picked the piston out of the casing, he had thoughts of simplifying the description of a possibly complicated part. You could see his dark face beam with an expression of simplicity + speech limitation, as he said in

almost a complete dialect, "That's all there is, there ain't no more!" We almost passed out with laughter. (12/10/43)

Finally, the first ride in the BT trainer was at hand.

Boys came back during all hours of the night

When the weather cleared on Friday night, they decided to call off the open post which had prevailed since 3:00 on Friday. To achieve that goal, they dispatched M.P.s to every town within a 50 mile radius, to round up the boys who had gone to all the various hotels + hot spots for the night. Thus, boys came back during all hours of the night (Saturday morning), each cussing that he had not avoided the M.P. who button-hooked him!

So on Saturday a.m. I got my first ride in the BT. It actually felt like I was in a transport, so great was the difference in the feel of the plane. You sit up there, snug as a bug in a rug, with complete glass enclosure + a hot air heater blowing in your face continually. Boy, there's plenty of power in this baby! I only got a chance to fly the plane for a little while on this trip, straight and level. Then, I had just a little difficulty in getting accustomed to listening to the instructor's voice over a radio, instead of through the Gosport tubes. Then, I got my first landing on a concrete landing strip, as the instructor brought the plane to earth. (12/12/43)

Lt. Bigelow, who George had assessed at first as "a young don't-give-a-damn kind of guy" (12/12/43), impressed the cadet with how he clearly explained the flying procedures. George also enjoyed the acrobatic stunts the instructor did for his riders. Basic was a big step up from Primary in terms of the size and complexity of the aircraft. The Walnut Ridge school included night flying, navigation, and cross-country flights.

Incidentally, the planes are roaring overhead, all night, now. Last night and tonight, moon light nights have provided excellent opportunity for the upper class to get night time, in. That should be fun. This must be

on the "main line," so to speak, for all types of combat planes land here + take off again. (12/12/43)

Ground school subjects included more aircraft recognition, at 1/25 of a second (eventually 1/100), radio operation, navigation, meteorology, aircraft mechanics and electrical systems. George's description of ground school at W.R. is illustrative:

These flight line lectures are all carried on in tarpaper shacks, similar to our barracks, + they are run in a general store style, with all the boys sitting around, smoking, etc. (12/14/43)

The Link simulator was an integral part of training at W.R. as it had been in Primary.

Then, at 3:30, I had another hour of link. I practiced climbing, gliding, etc. as before, preceding the introduction of a new element, the rough air. Now! There's some fun. Just try + keep the miniature plane on the artificial horizon, with the rough air being simulated in the link. That's something. However, I did catch on to it well enough to collect an "A" average grade from a rather inept + new instructor. Soon, I'll be learning to make climbing + gliding turns + follow a constant reading in the darned machine. (12/14/43)

When the shrill whistle made its tones reverberate into our ears at 6:00, this a.m., the thermometer read just 8 degrees above zero. To add to the fun (let's call it that), the wind of the night had burned out our fires, so there we stood when we got out of bed in these cold, damp "shanties." If I said that the boys were petrified I would be underestimating their state of rigidity. I never drink coffee, you understand, but I did pour a cup of it into me, this morning. I thought that I should, in order to get myself going.

After waiting for some little time to get the planes pre-flighted, I rode first with Bigelow! Despite the hot air heater, it was a bit chilly up at 7,000 feet. As usual, he was after me, not knowing what he was going to do with me, he couldn't solo me for all the tea in China, some of Lonstrup's

thunder. However, I judged for myself that I did not do as bad; at least, I made a good landing + almost threw him out of the plane in a spin recovery. (12/15/43)

A plethora of details accompanied George's explanations of how to fly his plane. He included illustrations of instrument panel dials, maneuver patterns, and procedures. He mentioned different "computers" that were utilized in navigation, but this is something far different than the electronic smart machines of the twenty-first century. These computers, such as the "E-60," were calibrated pieces of cardboard that were attached at a rotation point enabling various calculations, operating roughly on the same basis as a slide rule. These calculation tools were common on AAF aircraft.[8]

They figure out airspeed, ground speed, gasoline consumption, time required for a trip, wind drift, change nauts to statute miles, make instrument corrections for altitude, temp. and pressure + give proper readings in all instruments, in addition to paying your income tax, giving you extra points, giving furloughs + giving you the answer to why you joined the Air Corps. (12/15/43)

Letters from Walnut Ridge were laced with George's own special breed of comedy. He got lots of verbal mileage from the living conditions at the base.

In case you are interested, the ground school is just another shanty, heated by hot-air blowers, to be sure, but, it's still a shanty, with desks in it. That's one place here that is warm. So, we all go to sleep there. The instructors make the boys stretch out a bit! (12/15/43)

"You, too, can be an aviation cadet"

I was amused by your saying that the weather was not fit for animals to be out in; to that, I would like to add that they wouldn't allow human beings, or animals either, to exist under our conditions. Still aviation cadets can put up with it. Every time I go to the coal pile, behind the

latrine building, I think: "You too, can be an aviation cadet!" (as they say in the advertisement). They ought to dramatize this true picture of the training, + see how many applicants they get!

Before I did these landings, however, I had a new experience, my first experience in inverted flight. Lonstrup once said that when I first flew inverted, I would be sorry that I ever joined the Air Corps! But, I was much surprised! It was fun. The first time, Bigelow rolled it in + told me to find out how to get it out. (12/15/43)

Another added attraction, today, was the package from Barbara, containing the socks which she knitted. Now, I can truthfully say that this is the first warm-blooded thing that any girl has ever done for me!

Bigelow, the Rebel that he is has a long, deep southern drawl and a funny way about him that would mark him as a wild Indian + a crazy man, as you see him on the ground. He wears a red-white-blue striped stocking hat that sets him off from everybody else around + he has a don't-give-a-rap attitude of a carefree personality. In the air, he is very careful, + my first impressions of him were changed by the time I've been up with him. He yells + does not seem to care or worry if I can't do it – that being my worry – but, I'm used to it all, now. Anyways he rode with another student officer, whose instructor was not there, this morning. When he came down to us, his regular students, he said to us, "My boys are bad, but..." and he shook his head + smiled. So, I guess we are not the worst there is. (12/17/43)

On a weekend pass, George and "Stang" took a little trip to nearby Jonesboro where they met a group of men who were in a college training detachment at Arkansas State College. George was amazed at their naivety, not having been to Nashville or Maxwell Field yet.

We told them that they had better enjoy themselves while the opportunity was at hand; for, the scenes would certainly shift, once they got to the classification center. They had heard some faint ideas about Walnut Ridge, too. Not wishing to get them down in the dumps, we told

them that the chances were small of ever going there. Tarpaper shacks? Why, they couldn't understand that! But, they will! (12/19/43)

Walnut Ridge was a time of many ups and downs. The biggest crisis George was to face in his nine months in the Army reared its head on December 20. His ability as a pilot was suddenly called into question when Lt. Bigelow requested he have a non-scheduled check ride. George knew that this meant Bigelow was trying to get him eliminated from the program. Implied in the cadet's report home was that Bigelow did not like Neilson because he was a Yankee. A half century later, Dad (George) told me that the Reb instructor said to him, "Neilson, you *cain't flah*!"

About the flying, I don't just know what to think, today. When I reported to Lt. Bigelow, I found that I was going to get a progress check. At first, I almost fell over; because I did not believe that I was doing bad enough for a check ride. Then, again, I never would be surprised at what this Rebel, Bigelow, would do! Then, he told me not to worry too much about it, since it is not uncommon to get one, even before you solo. But, still I could not make the fact add up in my mind. I can't even tonight, decide why I should have ridden with another instructor, this afternoon. (12/20/43)

George flew the ride with Lt. Eden who was rather mum during the ride. Excepting a couple of instructions, he said nothing, but it was not the end of the episode. He also had to go on a check ride with the base commander, ostensibly as an elimination procedure. But after the test was over, George was still in the program.

Weather continued to put a damper on air time, as the boys did a lot of "hangar flying." On one occasion the men were put in the "Barany Chair" which was used to spin them around and get them dizzy while blindfolded. Then, they were asked what direction they were facing. The idea was to demonstrate what happens when ground is not visible. Dependence on instruments is vital as one cannot tell whether he is upside-down, sideways, etc. Learning to trust the instruments rather than your senses is vital for survival

in poor visibility. The men were taught how to find their way when they are lost. The solution, it seems, was to buzz the railroad station in a town and read the sign to find out where you are.

So, if you can imagine a plane coming down to read the sign on West Medford Station, you have a general idea of what they mean. However, the towns down here usually mean a group of houses + a general store. (12/23/43a)

Each instructor contributed valuable tid-bits of knowledge from his experience that would be a life-saver to the cadet.

The weather class consisted of a lecture by a civilian, who was a flier in the old "Jennies" of the last war. Since then, he has done a great amount of flying, it seems. He went on in the course of his talk on winds, to tell us how many men he knew that crashed into mountains, because they had little or no knowledge of weather! The main thing that you do in flying is not to encounter a tough situation but foresee it + stay out of trouble. (12/22/43)

Discouragement was a recurrent visitor, and some unprofessional conduct on the part of the instructors contributed to this, according to George.

There are still several of us who have not soloed + there's those who have not had much luck; but, I believe that is because I figured out the "don't give a darn" instructors for more than they are. They all claim they would rather be in combat. I've been discouraged. But, I believe I'll catch on, soon. If I get by this stage, it will be my last "doldrum," I'm sure. (12/23/43a)

Despite his differences with Lt. Bigelow, George continued to progress in his training. Some of it was frightening, such as when in a spin that he was to pull out of, his plane was traveling straight toward earth at 210 mph. Less frightening than bewildering was the day he was called to post headquarters and informed that a

paper-work fumble meant that he was never officially enlisted in the army. So, after signing some papers, he was officially in, and would receive credit for the previous ten months.

> I asked the corporal who was doing the clerical work, if he thought it would be worthwhile for me to sign up in this army. Naturally, he advised me not to; but, since I have been in for 10 months, I suppose that it might not hurt to get credit for it. The form which I signed tonight was headed "To be filled in on date of being called to active duty." (12/23/43b)

On Christmas day, George bemoaned the lack of Christmas spirit at the base, but extolled his appreciation to Ma for the gift of a $50. savings bond. He also received a nice package from home including candy, figs, apricots, raisins, nuts, fruit cake, and chocolate as well as a package with shoes, socks, and underwear. He spent what there was of a two-day pass in Jonesboro. George and two buddies piled into Earl Nelson's car and made the thirty mile trip. The only place that was decorated for Christmas was the Catholic Church, where George attended ten o'clock Mass. It was a raw and drizzly morning, and the cadet struggled to find the Christmas spirit. The Mass was about as close as he came to it. For dinner, the boys went to the El Patio room at the Noble Hotel where they stayed overnight. The dinner was plentiful and the men took their time to gain the feel of a home-cooked meal, although they knew it was a far-fetched substitute. To sum up Christmas of '43, George wrote:

> That's how I spent Christmas! Back here, everybody seems to have had some measure of fun—eating candy, nuts, cake, etc., all day. However, nobody thought it was Christmas, really; but, we all made a good attempt to keep from being too homesick. (12/25/43)

The Christmas passes were cut short a day to get some flying in when the weather broke. This put all the airmen in a foul mood, and the day was further ruined because unexpected weather

grounded all the planes. George still found a bit of humor amidst this otherwise disheartening day:

Savage amusement

I'd like to tell you of an amusing incident, regarding one of the boys in my barrack. His name is Schmidt + he comes from Flint, Mich. He got a bushel of assorted nuts, shell nuts: cashews, walnuts, pecans, peanuts, etc., everything, but most of them seem to be the world's hardest nuts. Furthermore, there is nothing that resembles a nut-cracker, anywhere in sight. He's been using two big, heavy stove-cover lifters; and, he has everybody in the barrack at wits end, listening to the continual thrashing + banging of the floor, the lifters + the nut shells, and, he's been at it faithfully sitting opposite one of the stoves all weekend. He was cracking nuts when I left for Jonesboro on Friday, he was cracking them when I returned + he has been doing it all during the interim. I suppose that it comes under the heading of savage amusement, but I am not sure. Anyway, he has put a big dent in the box of nuts + he's lying on his bed, now, trying to figure out why his stomach is sore.

Over the coming days at Walnut Ridge, the languid pace of things led to more discouragement.

It seems that just about everybody has gotten their commissions, by now. All the boys from school who were in the Naval Reserves, are on active duty now! Where am I? Right now, it looks like I'll end up as a navigator, unless I can get out of the slump that I am in, now. My mind is simply dull + nothing seems to excite it, nowadays. I know that I am not doing too well, yet I can't explain it. I try my best, but, I cannot satisfy myself that I am putting out my best effort. I have no explanation for it, at all! Since I am not a "natural," at learning the game of flying, I am undergoing no end of trouble, trying to satisfy the instructors. I have no trouble landing or taking off, or most of the things. I have had trouble with recognizing stalls, in this airplane. I think that if + when they let me go up by myself, I could straighten a lot of things out. Right now, I'm at the bottom of the morale "barrel." (12/27/43)

The fact that George felt left behind on soloing contributed to his melancholy. He was frustrated as well by the fact that he had no basis for comparing his progress with the others, as the feedback from the different instructors varied significantly, and some instructors preferred to wait longer to solo their cadets. The upshot of the cadet's earlier check ride was that he got a new instructor, a Lt. Davis. However, his assessment of Davis was not unlike that of Lonstrup and Bigelow. He simply did not say much about his student's flying, leaving George to wonder where he stood.

As George mentioned in his later memoirs, he had to make a ride with squadron commander Cpt. Ficke as he had been deemed to be making little progress by instructors Bigelow and Davis.

He told me that I did "damned well"

I almost had resigned myself to being on my way to reassignment when the Captain rode me. After Thursday's ride he had me compare my ride with those I had given to Bigelow, Davis, + the one with Edens. I told him, in a matter of fact style, that it was average, hence not very good. So, before he dismissed me, on Thursday, he guaranteed me that it was not a failing ride + that it was not unsatisfactory + that I should change my attitude, before Friday. Friday, I shot landings with him + flew around a little beyond, or below, the 2000' ceiling. He was impressed in that I did not get lost + was able to navigate from one field to another, on compass headings. When I got on the ground he told me that I did "damned well" + that was about all he said. He is the first man I've met who has been interested in whether or not we learn anything. In other words, he got me up in spirits, again. So, for a change, I looked forward to flying on Saturday. (1/2/44)

Cpt. Ficke got George a new instructor, Lt. Bach, who George knew to be a good fellow and interested in the boys. This instructor made all the difference in George's feelings and progress in basic.

After he let me put in a couple of none-too-good landings, he taxied up a taxi strip + said, "Do you think you can do it?" Surprised as I was, I turned around, smiled, + said "Sure!" So, as I poured on the coal + went around the traffic pattern, I felt as if it was about time + I was more or less mad at myself for not having the chance sooner. I felt like "Thank God, they finally got out of the back seat." Consequently, I put 5 landings right on the macadam runways of Walcott Field without any trouble at all. Evidently, Lt. Bach soloed me on the Captain's say-so. For, I had no chance to impress him at all. So, I climbed rejoicingly into the back seat for the customary free ride after soloing the B.T. That was not a bad New Year's or birthday present, was it? I told the Lt. it was my birthday + he was pleased. When I got back, he said, "Well, Mr. Neilson, how do you feel now?" I smiled as modestly as I should have. (1/2/44)

George added smugly that all three other students of Lt. Bigelow had their own problems and were getting check rides and reverted. The instructor had awoken everyone in the barracks by buzzing the roof one night, and was on restrictions much of the time. Other boys were not faring as well as George when things brightened for him. The remainder of New Year's Day entailed an inspection, a game of touch football, the movie, *Coney Island*, and payroll. George wrote a letter to Don Lonstrup as he had promised to do after he soloed in Basic and served a tour for some minor demerits. The CQ was a grounded pilot who let George write a letter instead of walking. All in a day's work.

So, things started off fairly well, for the New Year. I'm going to do my best, with God's help to keep them going. I sure hope that this year makes you more happy and comfortable, Ma. (1/2/44)

As in Primary, soloing turned the key to ignite Neilson's spirits and give him the confidence he needed to forge on in flight training. Ecstatic experiences such as occurred for George on New Year's Day were sprinkled lightly amid routines: ground school courses, PT, annoying instructors, sitting out bad weather

on the flight line, and eking out warmth from pot-bellied stoves in the tarpaper shacks.

George liked his new instructor, Lt. Bach, who was able to give him some positive feedback and withheld reprimands while George learned from his own mistakes. These mistakes, like flying over fog, failing to throttle up for complex maneuvers, and hard landings were common and relatively benign compared with the misfortunes of other boys. Some got miserably lost and landed in the wrong fields or had near catastrophic experiences. The skies and runways around Walnut Ridge were full of planes, hundreds of them. They were continually taking off and landing or doing complex maneuvers. It was a wonder there were not more serious accidents.

I figured I was a dead goose, for hot having shaved

Night flying, here, consists of flying in a pre-determined zone, at a pre-determined altitude. After flying in circles for a while, you come in and shoot landings on the lighted runway, all to the command of the radio which controls it all.

In ground school today, we had some more code, through which I slept, +weather. In place of regularly scheduled drill period, we had an inspection in ranks, by the tactical officer. What a surprise! What a set-up! Nobody had shaved, nobody shined shoes + nobody had proper uniforms beneath their overcoats. When the Lt. called for it, we had a big laugh, to his amazement. It was destined to be pathetic. I figured I was a dead goose, for hot having shaved. But, he passed me by. I was in such a silly mood about not getting what was due me that I burst out laughing when he passed. So, I got gigged for laughing in ranks! I couldn't complain, I figured I was good for them one way or the other. (1/4/44)

Today, a boy stuck his head out of the cockpit + got his hat + headset blown down the ramp, or, the runway. Meanwhile a number of ships were waiting to take off. So, he turned around + taxied after them. Then, over the radio came the announcement: Watch out for ship 4-3-zero, he's lost

his headset + doesn't know what he's doing! Everybody laughed. He taxied off the ramp + into the mud, chasing his hat + headset. That's the last I saw of him, as I was taking off with Lt. Bach for the only dual cross-country which they give here. (1/5/44)

The cross-country run was to the town of Luxora, about 35 miles away. The instructor buzzed the main street of the town, despite the fact that such antics are a court-martial offense. (1/5/44)

A beautiful pageant of lights

I received my baptism in night flying, last night. So, you see, Thursday started at 6:00 a.m. + ended at 3:30, this morning. "A trifle arduous," a Britisher might say. The night was lighted by a moon which was almost full. That added to the smooth-as-silk air, made it seem like a hunting dreamland, at the 3,300' altitude which was to be mine. Well, I made 4 dual landings + I was cleared for solo. You should have seen the whole thing, a beautiful pageant of lights playing all over the field: landing lights, runway lights, passing lights, etc. On my second landing, the Captain in the tower really landed it for me. He told me when to roll down flaps, break my glide, turn on landing lights, etc. He took time with me, since I was alone in the traffic. Hard, you say? Well, I only had 2 hours of day solo, when I did it. Then, after 1 hour of night dual, I soloed! Figure it out. Although you'd be scared to see it, there's not an easier thing to do. Visibility was good for miles (10 times as far as in the daytime). All you do is sit up there + maintain a constant bank, eat chocolates + listen to the radio! Well, only 6 of us got to solo; but it was the greatest thing in flying I've done yet! You actually feel more confident at night, than in day. (1/7/44a)

The night flying exercise was not as glorious for others. Wings were torn up or off of four ships, and the difficulty was pinned on the dispatcher. The base brass had a long meeting the next day to sort it out and tighten down soloing.

I almost fell asleep up there

But, concerning the flying, I had a strange feeling of confidence in myself, although I was not sure of the conglomeration of procedures which was stuffed into my head, prior to starting. However, I almost fell asleep up there, making big wide circles, listening to the radio, etc. Then, I had the light of the moon to keep me company.

Well, this afternoon I got an hour of dual + an hour of solo. The dual time was in aerobatics. Lt. Bach showed me snap-rolls, loops, slow-rolls, half-rolls + *Immelmann turns. What a work out! Boy, when you kick this airplane into a snap-roll, everything shimmies, quivers, + vibrates. You can hear the wind almost crackling, as the wings whip through the breeze. The slow rolls are rather hard to do; for, when you get upside down your head gets on the canopy, all the dirt comes out of the hull of the plane + the microphone usually hits you in the face. Then, you can't keep your feet on the rudders. It's about a hopeless situation. (1/7/44b)

*Named after World War I German fighter pilot Max Immelmann, it was a maneuver in which the plane makes a climbing turn followed by a 180° reversal back and then diving down in the direction of the original position. It was used in attacking a target from above multiple times.[9]

Sunday, January 9 was a day that George would vividly remember all his life. His account of this day's episode composed forty-six years later is no less rich in detail than the letter to Ma and Betty the day it happened.

It was one of those nights that makes me think of writing poetry

Saturday broke with a blinding snow storm piling drifts all over the ramp + runways, thereby cancelling flying automatically. It was just as cold, just as blustery + just as snowy as it ever gets at home. The officers kept with their usual antagonizing custom of keeping us hanging around in the drafty, cold + damp ready room (shack). When we don't fly, we still have to sit around the ready room, for the time which we are scheduled to spend on the flight line.

Saturday night was clear + cold, and I felt like going for a long walk in the moonlit night, except that I was too tired. It was one of those nights that makes me think of writing poetry. I did do myself a favor, though, by seeing Bing Crosby + Fred Astaire in "Holiday Inn." That was a real picture, old, true enough, but a real entertaining performance. It was wonderful and the boys enjoyed it a great deal.

This morning, instead of being at church, out for the weekend, in bed, or otherwise enjoying some free time, we were up at 6:00 + out at the flight line by 7:15 for a day long's flying. Wait 'til you hear what did come about, this afternoon! (1/9/44)

There was six inches of fresh snow on the ground that Sunday morning.

It was a strange feeling, just taxiing to the "devil may care" take off position today. It seemed like I should have been on skates, in an ice-boat or something. There I was trying to drive a B.T. through drifts + slush puddles, say nothing of getting it off the ground. So, I had my first experience of flying in + over snow. From the air the entire countryside looked like an immense flat landing field + the ordinary identification points were obliterated + camouflaged. "What a day for cross-country, I thought!" Landing, today, was like rolling the wheels onto a velvet carpet. (1/9/44)

No sooner had George landed after the morning flying than he learned that there would be a cross-country flight for his squadron involving three states that same afternoon. Class 44D had had no experience in flying over a snowbound landscape. The plan seemed reckless at best. The men were nervously in the air shortly after 12:00 p.m. The first leg of the three hundred mile route went well until George entered airspace over Advance, Missouri.

I was lost! Plainly, coldly, and pathetically

I continued picking out my check points, but no airfield. I knew it would be small; but, I also knew that it would be snow covered + hard

to see, anyhow. I saw the boys ahead of me, lining up on the railroads + going to towns 15 or 20 miles away, trying to orientate themselves + find the little landing strip, to go in for the pre-arranged landing. That was my first (only 15 minutes) experience with being lost. There must have been a field there, somewhere, for boys who had spent time to find it, were circling down, + almost near the ground. Well, after 20 minutes of frantic circling I found the field, called the control plane for landing instructions + let down, dragged her in over the fence (as you do on a strange field) + rolled my wheels on Missouri soil, 85 miles from W.R.A.A.F., after 35 minutes of flying.

5 minutes later, I was at 3,500' on a course of 129 degrees, to Martin, Tennessee. I found all my check points (towns, roads, railroads, bridges, etc.) + kept my heading, all the way. I went right smack over the Primary School at Union City, Tenn. + the boys had a great time zooming around the old B.T., trying to keep up, etc. Naturally I gave them the old pitch-changing roar, etc. But, Ma, I became too intrigued + took my mind off my work for just one minute + I didn't see my destination, nearby Martin, Tenn. I was lost! Plainly, coldly + pathetically. It is the dread of all pilots, at some time or other. Well, it happened again. I missed the little auxiliary field at Martin, + I wish I could describe the feelings that went through my mind as I set myself north over various towns, trying to orientate myself and set a course to Martin. For 45 minutes I suffered mental torture. I couldn't get anything on the ground that lined up with my map.

What a feeling of lonesomeness, helplessness, + forlornness. I even engaged a P.T. which was out of Union City. I tried to signal that I was lost; but they insisted that I wanted to play + started to get on my tail. Finally, I gave that up + started off in almost desperation, all the time trying to contact the Martin control ship! By the grace of God, I did happen to cruise over the field by chance alone; so, I called in (we weren't supposed to land) + started off, rejoicing that I had not let myself down. That was the tightest spot I've been in all my life, so help me. I think that somebody was good to me this time.

With all that settled, I started off on my course of 260 degrees for home, the long, homeward leg, across the Mississippi + a lot of barren ground. This time, I stayed on course + came right over all my check

points, according to schedule. Never was I more glad to come in over the field + report home to the tower at 5:45, after 3 ¾ hours of it.

This is the kind of flying that I like, despite it all. I still can't collect myself to everything that happened today. Perhaps my going to confession last night, helped me get out of my jam, today. (1/9/44)

Following the terrifying experience of the first solo cross-country flight in Basic, George was more focused on watching landmarks on the ground. His survival of the January 9 experience seemed to kick-start his sagging attitude at W.R. It was the half-way point in Basic, but there was much lost flying time to make up, and things shifted into high gear as the weather became milder and the base command pushed to get 44D their required air time. The cadets needed seventy hours to complete Basic, including twelve solo instrument hours. The remainder of January was the busiest and moist strenuous time since the cadet's enlistment almost a year before.

Now, you'll recall Sunday's ordeal which I described. Well, we went right back on the line Monday morning, again. Let me describe Monday's schedule, which went from 6:00 a.m. til 2:00 a.m. this morning, with only the time out for chow. Some of the boys didn't have time to relieve themselves and that is the honest truth.

Gee, things are happening thick + fast. Instruments, night flying, cross-country, etc. Then, we don't have a second to ourselves. I haven't written to anybody else but you folks for over a week. You'll have to tell Bob and the others that it is impossible, that's all. (1/11/44a)

The ground school curriculum was heavily packed with instrumentation and weather. The science of meteorology had become much more predictive, and as all-weather flying became expedient in the European theater, pilots had to be well versed on this subject. Since long-range bombing missions lasted up to twelve to thirteen hours, pilots could not always rely on weather data from their bases to see them through. Instrument flying was

a very challenging study, as well on the ground as in its aerial application.

Airtime in January centered on night flying, particularly landing, cross-country navigation, instruments, and formation flying. When ready, pilot trainees had to fly "under the hood," a cover that prevented the pilot from seeing outside the airplane, forcing him to rely on instruments. In these circumstances, the term "meter reader" was humorously used to refer to the instrument pilot.

An elaborate scheme was devised to practice night landings. The planes would be flown in four zones, stacked at various altitudes in each. This facilitated having sixteen aircraft within a short distance of the field while avoiding collisions. The traffic was controlled by the radio tower, and the dispatcher would call each plane by zone, level, and so forth, and the pilot then was to drop into the proper position to land. After just a few seconds on the ground, the pilot took off again, and this continued until the pilot was asked to hold on the ground. The complex arrangement was referred to by the boys as "the big deal." It made for quite a light show as well, as George describes hereafter.

I was in the 2nd order in zone 3. I flew in "middle 2," at 2500 feet. I got two hours, from 9:20 'til 11:30. What a beautiful night! Full moon, snow on the ground + clear as a bell. What more could we ask? I circled in my zone for 1 ½ hours, before the tower called me down, to the center of the field at 1200', thence into traffic at 700'. If you just listened to the radio, the tower told you just what to do. So, I shot 8 landings, before they said, "Hold it on the ground, middle 3, you've made your last landing." (1/11/44a)

On Tuesday, 1/11/44, Neilson made his second cross-country ride from WR, a 335 mile triangle to Corinth, Tennessee, Jack's Creek, Tennessee, and back to base. This time, George was diligent to navigate to each checkpoint using ground speed, wind correction angle, ETA, and map distance using an E-6B computer.

One boy buzzed about every town in Tennessee

This turned out to be the most enjoyable ride I have yet to experience in the B.T., complete with one of the government's $16 E-6B computers, my map + course plotted thereon. You see, the two points to which we flew in Tennessee are so hidden in the rugged terrain that you have to know when you should be over the field, by computation, or you'll miss it. My big thrill came in realizing that I had calculated my estimated time of arrival properly. Then, I rejoicingly called in, "524 returning from cross-country, landing instructions." There were no mishaps today but one boy buzzed about every town in Tennessee, trying to read a railroad sign + locate himself. He had been lost for over an hour.

There's not a minute that we have to ourselves, these days; so, you'll have to understand that these letters represent the "beside myself" frame of mind which I am really in. But, I'm getting to like it, + I'm for it, all the way! To give you an idea of enjoying it, as I crossed the river coming home, I put my feet on the floor, crossed my arms, sat back + opened the canopy to get a few minutes of fresh air + relaxation! Some fun, eh? (1/11/43b)

I hauled her out when she was at 230 mph

We flew this morning + I got 1 hr. 35 minutes of solo time + my second instrument ride. During my solo time, I decided to see what she'd do in a dive. I did not think it best to pass the red line on the air speed indicator; so, I hauled her out when she was at 230 mph. 230 is the maximum allowable diving speed on the B.T. The B.T. no longer seems like the big aeroplane that it did a couple of weeks ago. I don't renege at trying anything in [the] thing, now. Of course, I did "try" a hard landing this morning.

On my instrument ride, I pulled the hood over my head, for the first time. Except for my feet being frozen in that ice-box of a back seat, I could have sworn I was in the link trainer. There's no kidding, either, that you have to believe the instruments as to what altitude of flight you are in, because your body absolutely lies to you. You'd swear you were turning, when you're actually in level flight, etc. When we left the flight line this morning, we discovered that our section was scheduled to hit the line on

the "swing shift" of the current 24 hr. flying day. Yes, we are supposed to finish up our Basic night flying, starting at the horrible hour of midnight tonight! No rest for the wicked, or aviation cadets either!

In navigation, we are beginning on the next step in pilot navigation. This is called "dead reckoning," the use of longitude, latitude, + known distances to determine your position. The navigation which we employed on our cross-country rides was called "pilotage." The other two phases of navigation are "celestial" and "radio nav." (1/12/44)

Today, I got into another new wrinkle – formation flying. It was all dual, today, with 3 instructors + their students in each formation. They really fly close (wings about 3 or 4 feet from the lead ship's tail). It is strictly a matter of throttle coordination + keeping the eyes right on the leader. The 6 hours of formation will include formation take-offs, landings, dives, climbs, etc. Well, that's the story for tonight; I'm so tired that I can't see straight. Maybe I'd better hit "the sack," as they call it here. (1/13/44)

The toughest week in our flight training

Yesterday, they served us with an ultimatum, not to come down without 4 hours, for the afternoon. With the aid of our new boys, "The Wing Walkers" and the gas truck, we all got 4 hours in. Thus, the boys dragged their behinds off the line at 6:00, after what will probably be the toughest week in our flight training. My total of 26 hours and 40 minutes was quite a bit. The boys averaged 27 hours, for the week. That is more time than I had previously totaled on one month, in the other squadron. Tonight, I have 52 hours. Most of the rest of the time will be concerned with 10 more hours of instruments + 5 more hours of formation flying.

At 4:00 we had to parade out to the flight line, to form a ceremonial background, while the Colonel presented the Distinguished Service Medal to a woman whose son, a technical sgt. is a prisoner of war in Germany. (1/16/43)

That's quite a thing, learning to fly formation. You never look at your own plane, you never know where you are going next. All you do is keep

your eyes glued on the lead plane + do everything that he does or signals for. It is all done by throttle coordination + keeping your plane in the same attitude as the lead ship. Believe me, it's hard work and you must be on your toes. It is mighty tricky when you consider that the airplanes are only 20 and 30 feet apart at the most. (1/17/44)

George told the pitiful tales of instructors who seemed to do anything for reassignment.

They'll do practically anything to get out of here. Another instructor, who is leaving, did a slow roll at 50 feet, sometime back, with a mechanic in the rear seat. He was court-martialed + fined for it. But, they think it is worth it, to get out of here. (1/17/44)

Back to the mundane, George enthusiastically reported in the same letter that he had found a spot in town called The Salad Bowl to get a satisfactory steak, something which excited the young man as much as anything else in his precious free time.

George continued to do well in his flying, mentioning a successful forty-hour check ride (when he had almost sixty hours) and "helpful" instructors. His explanation of intricate aviation procedures would have convinced his family that flying was a complex business:

Our second class was in navigation. The topic of the day was "Double Drift.," the method by which navigators can tell the actual wind direction + velocity, while flying over long distances across water. The way it is done is to fly 45 degrees on either side of the course, meanwhile observing drift through a drift indicator. Then, you plot the drift on a computer + find that the intersection of your drift lines will provide a point which shows wind velocity and direction. (1/19/44)

Cruising around, acrobatics, high altitude flying, etc.

Today was another bright, clear day; and I had the pleasure of getting off into the sunrise just at 8:00. We were assigned solo ships at 8:00, for two hour periods with instructions to circle the field + check in at the end

of an hour's time. Most of the boys went on self-designed "cook's tours" of the surrounding territory, including Jonesboro + even Newport, which is considerably beyond the flying limits of the field. It seems like everybody goes up + has nothing special in mind to do, for the remaining time; consequently, everybody does as they please – cruising around, acrobatics, high altitude flying, etc. (1/20/44)

During my instrument ride, Lt. Short tried every + all means to teach me to hold the plane on a heading, in level flight, by use of the gyro compass. If you think it's easy to keep the plane straight + level on a given heading, why you're simply crazy! I guess nobody can do it, so, I'm no different! It comes with incessant practice, though. While flying instruments, all you do is look at the controls + they want to move. Talk about getting tense! They have to keep telling you to relax while under the hood.

On Saturday afternoon we had our regular weekly inspection, for which we had to mop this floor, straighten out our foot lockers for inspection, + dust up the room, in addition to chasing the mice out of the barrack bags. Yes we have plenty of them + they have already eaten through a suntan shirt which I had in my barracks. After inspection, we had a bone-braking, wild game of basketball out in the athletic area. (1/23/44)

Anyhow I got an hour and 15 minutes of "meter reading," this morning, bringing my instrument time to 6 hours (1/2 the total). I began to notice a little improvement in my own ability to hold a heading, maintain altitude + keep the plane level, while under the hood. Right now, I am fortunate in having a patient, tolerant man for instruments; so, there is no complaint on that score. My instructor simply tells me what to do, then he gives me plenty of time to do it + make proper corrections and then he tells me about it. (1/24/44)

Clearly this approach to instruction worked well for George, in contrast to the yelling and reprimands of some. Ironically, his once-yelling adversary, Don Lonstrup, wrote Neilson a nice letter with lots of wisdom on handling new aircraft, news about his present students, and chit-chat about planes, weather, and

the like. Inviting more reports on his former student's progress, George signed off his letter with,

...he'll kick me all the way to Boston if I let him down. (1/24/44)

One plan that was instituted for practice in instrument flying was called buddy rides. The pilot would sit in the back seat under the hood while another cadet rode in the front seat and observed.

Well, I had a busy day "under the hood," this afternoon, trying to absorb a few of the tricks of the instrument trade. To start off, I had a 2 hour "buddy ride" with another cadet. Today, we had no less than a 45 m.p.h. wind at 2500.' (Incidentally, that wind was the tail end of a hurricane moving up from the Gulf.) So, you can see that the directions had to be pretty precise or we would have drifted all over hell's kitchen. Thus, you see, we're having a great old time learning to fly by instruments. It isn't too much fun, either. It is mostly hard work + mental strain + tenseness. (1/25/44)

During class, the cadets were shown a film called *Pilot's Heaven* in which Guy Kibbee played St. Peter. The heavenly gatekeeper was having a discussion with an army officer about how various residents arrived there, and were crowned with little wings on their backs. In each scene, an aerial accident was portrayed.

One fellow always took off without checking the "form I" to see that the plane was properly serviced. He crashed, out of gas, over the mts. Another boy was an "H.P." + was showing off for his girlfriend, low altitude acrobatics. He crashed into the barn on his girl's property + was blown to bits. (1/25/44)

From the weather class, George gleaned another morsel on safety:

They have records of planes going into a dive, while in a thunderhead, + being thrown out through the top tail-first by the violent updrafts that are usually found in these clouds. (1/25/44)

Obviously, George's quick mind and drive to succeed sustained him as the complexity of his training intensified. Many of his letters read like a flight-training manual with personal annotations.

To place in perspective the volume of the cadet's letters, what is quoted in this work is only five to ten percent of the actual content of the letter archive. One can only image how Ma and Betty reacted to this daily elucidation. Perhaps they were amazed, amused, or both over the arcane content of their son's/ brother's letters. Undoubtedly, writing the letters helped George to process the intricacies of his training as well as provided him the satisfaction of knowing that his loved ones understood the enormity of the task he was engaged in.

Some of the pressure of instrument flying was removed when George was unexpectedly given his instrument check ride at six hours, half-way through the twelve instrument hours of the program. Even though he had not had instruction in all of the skills tested, the ride went satisfactorily.

"Your ride wasn't too bad," was the only comment of Lt. Irbenekr, who had me on the check.

Now, with the gyros caged, it is entirely beyond human capability to tell what position you are in. You can be upside down, diving at red-line speed, in a spin or up in a stall; yet your body cannot interpret the thing properly. Every time, it will tell your mind that you are in some position which you are really not! The only things to go by are the altimeter, the air-speed indicator + the bank + turn indicator. I managed to wrestle the plane out of 3 positions, whatever they were. (1/28/44)

For the first time, George had had enough of flying for a while, so intense had the schedule been for the last several weeks.

Well, I had port of the mental strain of learning instruments removed this morning, when I had my instrument check ride. It came entirely as a surprise since I had only 6 hours of time prior to the check. I did not expect to get the ride until I had nearly the twelve hours. It was more or less fortunate that the stress + strain did not get a chance to accumulate

for the 12 hours; because, I, like the rest, am just about ready to forget flying for a little while. We are really tired out, mentally + physically. Nobody cares if they even see an airplane for a while. (1/28/44)

He told me to come out and do a little sight-seeing

In the morning, I got one of the boys in the regular morning section to act as safety pilot for me, while I got my last two hours of instrument cross-country time. It is certainly a good feeling when you can fly under the hood + then open the hood and find yourself exactly where you hoped to be.

After we finished the instrument flying, I tried a bit of flying from the back seat, on contact. That is, just as if I was an instructor showing a student how to fly. It is almost a hardship to have [to] do maneuvers from the rear seat of the B.T. It is just another reason why the instructors hate to instruct.

Lt. Short fixed me up to ride with Lt. Vechietti, one of the smoothest pilots on the field. He questioned me, as follows: "How much time do you need??" "2:10," I replied. "Well, I'll give you as much as possible then." I interrupted, sensing the situation, saying, "But, I've had my check." "Oh, says he, "that's different, you'll get your 2 hrs. 10 minutes, don't worry. He meant that I'd get 2:10 on the books, anyway. The ride lasted a little longer than an hour but it was a real "buggy ride." He started up under the pretense of having me do some instrument work. After letting me do a few turns and a stall, under the hood, he told me to come out + do a little sight-seeing. All the time, we had been heading west. Then, he asked me if I wanted to work, for he said that he surely had no desire to do anything, but ride. I shook my head, with a big smile on my face. Before a half hour was up, we were well into the Ozark Mountain region + heading for two quaint little hilltop towns, which the Lt. had spotted previously. (1/30/44)

The Lieutenant proceeded to put on an acrobatic show over the little towns, much to George's and his own amusement.

When we got back on the ground, I thanked him for the buggy-ride. He said, "At ease, that was dual instruments!" Nice fellow. (1/30/44)

On the way to Bono Field, I rode with Murphy (Lonstrup's boy also). All the time, I was imitating Lonstrup's teaching to him, over the interphone. We had a great time. Then, the radio couldn't contact Capt. Eaton, on Bono Field. After 3 vain attempts, we finally heard him say, "Okay, Murphy, you two Junior Birdmen can come in + land, now. We'll let you play with the radio, later." It was great time. It was like a picnic at Bono.

Oh yes! A student officer + I flew a plane back from Bono which was next to empty of gas. The tanks hold 120 gals,; but they both registered 0. (P.S. we didn't run out.) (1/31/44)

We were supposed to act repentant and subdued

It begins to look like there won't be much flying for us, during the next few days (2 weeks or more); for, we only sat around the stove, today + watched the eager "Zombies" (class 44E) start to work their pants off. I don't really care if I don't have to fly old man Vultee's 'd—d' old vibrator, any more than anybody else in the class. The noise of those old P.W. Engines is still ringing in our ears, too!

Talk about Craftiness, one of the "G.I.'s" who dictates the policies of our P.T. program decided to make us pay for the fooling that went on, en route from the P.T. area today. So, he was going to have us run around the camp "until we learned to keep quiet" while marching. Evidently, he thought that maybe we didn't know we were supposed to be quiet while marching. As we started running, we were supposed to act repentant + subdued. However, we all gave him the hee-haw + challenged him to run us into the ground; but, his feet soon got weary + he dismissed us. After 11 months of this stuff, some 3 or 4 month G.I. simply can't handle a ravenous crowd like us, in that manner. All the enlisted men seem to have to worry about is 3 day passes, + 10 day furloughs. (2/1/44)

From February 1 until 44D left for Advanced Flight Training, it was the story of a group of cadets figuring out how to use two weeks with very little to do. The men slept in and instead of the mess hall, grabbed toast and cocoa at the PX. They played roughhouse basketball and finished up some ground school

classes, one in particular on weather. George went to church when he could, explaining to his mother that it was the best place to be while on open post.

White sitting in the USO club during a dance the previous evening, George picked up the *Arkansas Democrat*, a Little Rock paper, and found a picture of ice boating on the Mystic Lakes, his boyhood playground. He cut it out and sent it to Frank Trott, one of George's old-timer friends at the Boat Club. For a few moments, home wasn't very far away.

As January came to an end, George breathed a sigh of relief. He had just completed his 70/12 flying hours, and after eight weeks of around-the-clock training, things began to change dramatically. After assignments for the next training stage were announced, class 44D was effectively grounded to free up planes for the underclassmen, who had been sidelined. George and the 44D boys found themselves with more leisure time on their hands than they knew what to do with. The relief of tensions unleashed in George the most hysterical collection of verbosity that had yet spewed from his pen. The last two weeks of letters from "the Ridge," as George often referred to WRAAF, were so replete with jovial yarns that space only permits a sampling, of which the announcement of new orders must be included.

> The underclassmen are getting their fling at flying all day + they are pretty upset when they come in + see us sprawled all over the barracks, at night. We tell them that, "It's good for you." (2/4/44)

> When everyone finally got up [at 11:o'clock] it seems that they all converged upon the P.X. for some breakfast, just preceding the regular dinner formation. It was reminiscent of some of the Saturday mornings when we used to eat breakfast + dinner within an hour of each other. (2/6/44)

This lazy morning was the first scene of a weekend that could have been lifted from an episode of *Gomer Pyle, USMC*, the 1964-69 TV comedy show about a lanky, trouble-prone recruit

and his grumpy NCO, Sgt. Carter. This segment features Nebel, Murray, Neilson, and a Hal Smith. The merry chase began when the foursome bummed rides to Walnut Ridge where they hopped a taxi to nearby Paragould, a familiar landmark on the cross-country flights overhead. The only lodging option was a decrepit Panama Hotel over a "cheap, scrimy, filthy tavern."

It provoked me to sit down and compose a mystery novel: oil lamps, slats showing through the plaster, broken walls, no ceilings, except clapboards, far worse than you have ever seen in a wild-west film.

Finding ourselves in the street once again, we decided to get out of the newly falling rain, as quick as possible. Right ahead of us, we saw a bus terminal – "Northern Arkansas Lines," or some such. Immediately, we thought that we might as well go to Jonesboro. So, we hopped on a comfortable bus, and another 50 cents and an hour's ride found us in Jonesboro.

By this time, it was nearly ten o'clock. The only "hot spot" in Jonesboro being a wild + wooly "Juke Joint," we found ourselves within its smoke-filled confines. The crowd (200 or 300) included people from these walks of life – instructors, cadets, pre-flight cadets from Ark. State Univ., G.I.s, girls from the same college, farmers + plain ordinary Ark. Hicks! All I was interested in was food, at this point, while Nebel + Murphy had some beer.

Before an hour had elapsed, Nebel couldn't resist engaging this table full of 4 girls who seemed respectable + rather at a loss for something to do. We were right, they had come to the place because there was no place else to go, but they were now almost afraid + sorry they came. As soon as we found out they had a car, we were only too glad to get out of the stuffy joint, anyhow. (2/6/44)

The young ladies included the daughter of the colonel at the CTD in Jonesboro, a student at the college, an employee at the director of training office at W.R., and a base secretary at the same. All eight piled into the 1942 Pontiac and found a place to grab hamburgers and milk. On the road again they got a flat in the colonel's car and fixed it, with the observation that you could see

the inner-tube through a large gash in the tread. They roamed the streets of Jonesboro from 1:30 to 3:30 a.m., whereupon the girls let the fellows off at the Noble Hotel.

Ready for some snoozing, they suddenly came to the realization that they had neglected to order a room! The first plan was to bum some floor space in a room where their friends were sleeping. They perused the hotel roster in search of such willing subjects.

After trying 2 of the rooms + almost getting decapitated for waking the boys up, we decided that maybe we could sleep in the lobby. No, that wouldn't do, according to the aged, back-bent, old Arkansan night clerk. What to do next? Ah! The parking lot – cars. Whose car should be there but "Pop" Nelson's. (He had put up at the hotel with his wife.) Of course it was locked, but a ¼ inch opening in the window vane led the way to a "jimmying" job, which found us on the inside in about 10 seconds. We slept, with all the elaborate comforts of a back + front seat, from 4 'til 8:30 a.m., when we decided that our predicament would not look too well to outsiders passing by. (2/6/44)

Back in the hotel, the W.R. four washed and shined their shoes for a cheery Sunday morning. George went to church while the others got breakfast. Afterward, the foursome strolled the streets of town, wondering what their next move would be. This one was to be Murphy's brainstorm. They took a bus to the campus of Arkansas State College where the pre-pre-flight cadets were. They figured, accurately, that they could get a good, inexpensive meal, and were successful at that, table service girls and all. After nosing around campus for a while, they caught a lift back to Walnut Ridge with "a middle aged couple in a nice big car, pleasure style." They even had a ride from W.R. town center to post with a single girl in another Pontiac. Then, a speculative remark on the twenty-two-hour sortie by Gomer:

Although nothing was very constructive that we did, we got a change of mind + it didn't cost much. Also, we might get a chance to ride around

with that Colonel's daughter, if we get open-post again. She comes from Texas + graduated from one of those foolish "finishing schools," but, she's a half-way decent girl + we all go together, so what's there to lose? (2/6/44)

To the last question one might conjecture a night in the brig or fifty tours. One can almost hear the proverbial Sgt. Carter yelling, "Pyle, what is the matter with you?" George concludes this most informative letter with the following, more fitting for the character Eddie Haskell, the two-faced friend of Theodore in *Leave it to Beaver* (polite, that is, when Eddie was around Beaver's parents).

Remember, Ma, I always try to do only what you would term proper + halfway sensible; so you can still depend on me telling you exactly what I do with myself. Also, I think of what you'd like me to do, when I go to church; and, I still pray that I can do everything the way you want me to. I think of you, many times every day. (2/6/44)

Indiscretions notwithstanding, there can be little doubt George meant every word of this expression of family loyalty, and ever lived true to it. He attended to his spiritual obligations whenever possible, stating that religion was the best way to spend his spare time in the army. This must have pleased mother Anastasia immensely, although she bawled him out for sleeping in a car.

Anyway, I'll keep what you told me in mind. I don't believe that I would be anxious to try that stunt again, anyhow. (2/13/.44)

Tidings of our future fate in this air "corpse"

Ah, yes! We were wakened from our usual after dinner naps at 1530, by the sharp, shrill blasts of the bitter charge of quarters' whistle. We all gathered in the area, feeling very disgruntled that they would allow airplanes to drone overhead continually and be of such a nuisance to the nerve-shattered light-sleepers who had finally dozed off just in time to have their slumber so rudely terminated by the #@!!# blankety--- whistle. On the other hand, however, a certain amount of curiosity about

the next formation bringing tidings of our future fate in this air "corpse" has been leading many of the boys to willingly meet formations on time during this one of the rarely restful periods of the "plot." At any rate, (+ despite my rested brain's willingness to get poetic with words, in this epistle), we were rewarded. Or were we? For, instead of one of the many Air Corps formations merely intended to arouse our ire + disdain, they really gathered us around + read off the lists. To make a long story short, you could take-off from here + about 100 miles, and you'd be where I expect to be within a week or so.

Ah! Yes, Blytheville! Blytheville! Situated near the banks of the Mississippi River in this glorious state of Arkansaw, which I have come to hold dear to my heart during these past 4 calm, restful, enjoyable months! What more would anyone wish for than to be stationed in Arkansaw for another 9 or 10 weeks. Why, it is an honor bestowed upon us that really reflects credit on the Eastern Flying Training Command. For, in what other state can you find such a variety of methods of transportation as ox-team, horseless carriage, horse-back, mule-back, pony team, all on the same road, + in the center of the same town, at the same time, on a Saturday night. Thus you have another description of pre-historic, 18th century Arkansaw + Walnut Ridge, to get down to cases. No, nobody was disgruntled or upset to learn that we would be privileged to fight the "Battle of Arkansas" for another 2 months.

All but 40 or 50 of us are going to go to Bly (the) ville, (you pronounce it as if there was no "the" or as if there was no Blytheville, no Arkansas, no Air Corps, I don't really care), the mention of which would give you some deep clues as to when we plan to invade the Admiralty Islands in the Pacific. So, stand by for future announcements in that regard. Yes, about 250 of us are going to be "meter readers," while about 50 of the "little squirts" will get the real break, by being sent to single-engine Advanced at Spence Field, in Moultrie, Georgia.

So, I'll probably end up flying big bombers

So, I'll probably end up flying big bombers, although there is the remote chance of getting into the "hot" A-20 or the P-38, from T.E." I do not know for certain, just what A.T. is in use at Bly-ville. I hear that

there are several + that you get to fly the B-25 (Mitchell Bomber) during the final weeks. So, I'll let that ride, for a while.

There's quite a number of boys who are saddened because they still held hope for their waning chances of becoming single-engine "hot pilots." But, the chaplain is soothing their nerves tonight with one of those wailing sessions that follows all such shipping orders in the Air Corps. I could be so vulgar os to say that they are having their cards punched (attention – Junior), I'm really roaring tonight, ain't I?

So, life goes on [at] this, one of Walnut Ridge's most beautiful reservations for criminals (also known as air cadets). We only have P.T. + drill twice a day now. That is simply designed to keep us out of mischief (+bed, too) + at the same time it gives us more food-for-thought on the cadet's long dreamed of hopes to get his hands on some of these #$@lanky 2nd lewy tactical officers, when this war is over. (I mean the big war between U.S.-Germany + [I think] Japan). Our P.T. periods find us involved in volleyball + basketball games which terminate in demonstrations which would arouse your awe + ire, far more than would any mayhem or body-mangling scene that you could see on the street. Why the blood-bestrewn peoples of conquered + starved Poland look like vacationing princes and princesses beside our mighty band of murderers, otherwise known as the 687th training squadron. (2/7/44)

George also mentioned that he got his watch (which never did keep proper time) repaired for $2.00 at the local watchmaker who was also a blacksmith.

It seems that I only managed to get one of the jewels out of line, when I dropped it off my wrist, onto the concrete while getting into Mr. Vultee's $30,000 "bucket of bolts."

So, that's the story, "The Call of the Desert" or "Return to Primitive Life" or "6 Months in Arkassaw." Seriously, I am pretty glad to get this far; and, I'll do my best in the increasingly responsible training duties that are ahead. Remember, I know you'll pronounce it Bly "th" ville, regardless. It is so New England like. So, pronounce it as you please. (2/7/44)

As February descended on Walnut Ridge, George wrote of forced landings, tense moments under the hood, and machinations at 2,500 feet. He described mess meals, letters from B.U., and wallowing away hours in the service club while awaiting transit to the next post.

The quorum was in favor of turning on the jive

The next hour and a half was spent, to my own great pleasure, listening to the strains of 2nd Hung. Rhapsody, Dance of the Hours, Invitation to the Waltz, etc. However, I fear that many of the cadet wives who decorate the scenery during the idling daylight hours were very bored + disturbed that there was no boogie-woogie emanating from the speaker of the tired + weary Victrola record player which some kind hearted Walnut Ridgian must have given to the club. Anyhow, after Nolan, Nebel, Nelson, Murphy + company strolled on to the scenery, we played a few records from Beethoven and Strauss, but, I could see that the quorum was in favor of turning on the jive. Just before the first jazz record went under the needle, some of the wenches + their knitting must have got on their great resources of brass, gall + nerve, for a nickel was dropped into the jute box [GN spelling] on the other side of the room. Some "Honky Tonk Jump" or whatever it was, was in striking + bitter contrast to Johann the Strauss, the spirit of competition entered us all at once. Nebel grabbed from beneath a heap of never played records, a recording of our dearly beloved Enrico Caruso. Applying it gently but firmly to the turn table, we advanced the throttle, turned all the volume knobs to the right, put the needle on the record + let Caruso have the honor of caressing the dear ladies who were reluctant + impatient, saying nothing of being too simple, to listen to our program of the classics.

Ma, I am so sorry that I hurt your feelings regarding Vultee's airplanes. They really are far and away the best basic trainer in use. I think that I have mentioned before that they are the only ones, also, didn't I? (Subtle, ain't it?) (2/8/44)

Things were winding down for 44D and a spirit of levity seemed to settle upon the conquerors of this stage of "the Battle of Arkansas."

Another day has been spent at this great winter resort of Walnut ridge! I spent a very relaxing afternoon drowsing on my bed while listening to the recorded music from a station at Poplar Bluff, Mo. Through the generous courtesy of an underclassman whose radio we used. Of course, we haven't told him that we used it; but it was nice of him anyway. Well, I must adjourn this letter for a while; for, they are tendering our class a party at the Officer's Club tonight. So, I'd better get prettied-up + get into my light sport coat + "garbadine" [gabardine] pants and get over there. (2/9/44)

The graduation party featured t-bone steak dinners (of which George managed to muster two). Colonel Guillette came to the gathering and chatted sociably.

Please don't send my boy to Blytheville

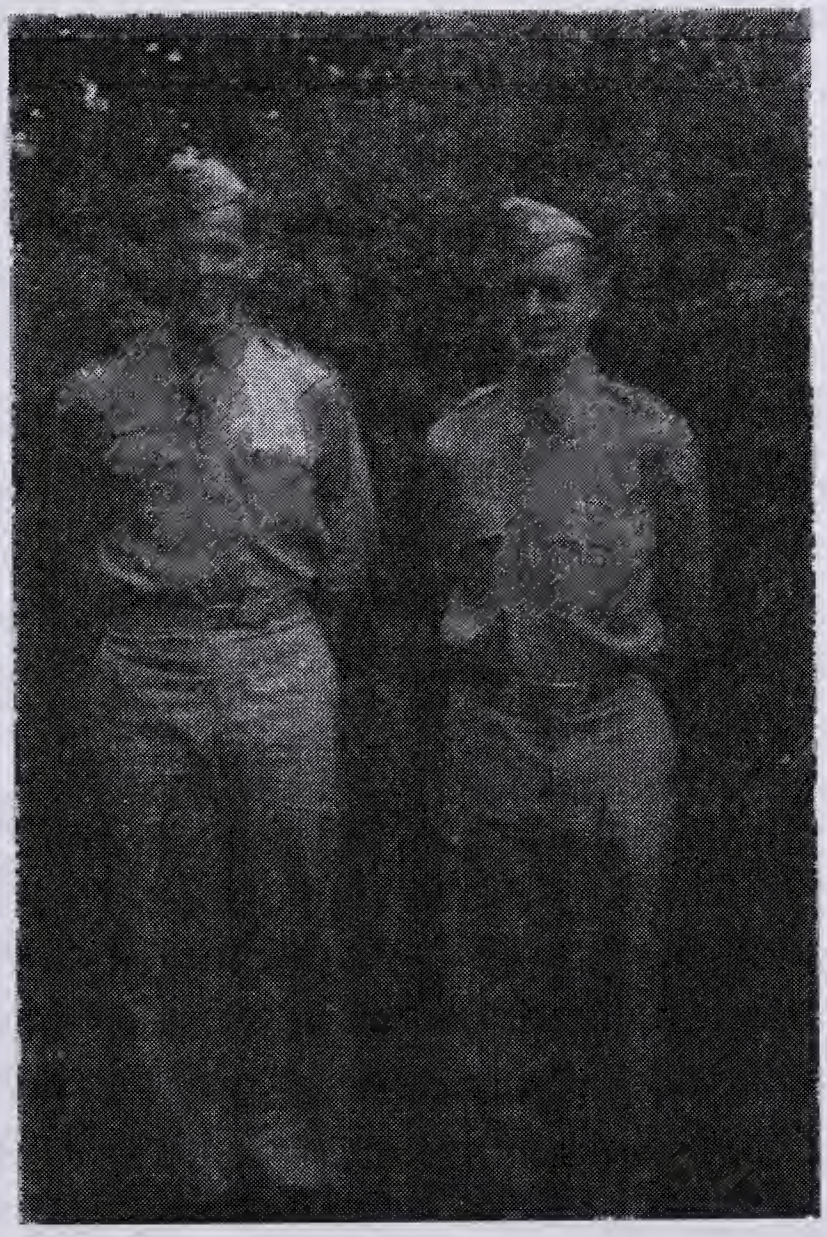
He told us that the next plane, the A.T.-9 is a fast ship and that the transition would probably be very great, just as great as from a P.T. to a B.T. He said that the A.T.-9 has all the cockpit procedure of a 4 engine plane, and it is not easy to fly. The A.T.-9, says he, is the best preparatory ship for fast twin-engine bombers and fighters; but, whether or not you get 4 engine planes afterwards, depends upon the need for them at the time.

In the course of the after-dinner activities during which the boys took a dig at the tactical officers who have charge of "gigging, etc.," a trio of boys who were singing songs started one as if it were a request from a dying mother. "Please don't send my boy to Blytheville. I'd rather have him dead." Colonel Guillette, I am sure, did not like it. All in all, it was a great dinner and it was a pleasing gesture on the part of the officers to us. Yes, they had free beer for everybody; but, I had to pay for my Coca-Cola. It doesn't seem to add up, does it? Another unscheduled feature of the event was a crap game in a corner of the lounge room of the club. I'm sure the colonel enjoyed it fully. (2/9/44)

On the threshold of Act III of army flight training, George seemed rested and ready for the next challenge, though ever cautious not to declare victory too soon.

So, we'll be leaving Basic, soon. I feel at last a bit rested and ready to start the "last lap," I hope. I feel that I ought to make it, now; yet, nobody ever thinks of getting finished. Too many things can happen. So, I'll leave for Advanced hoping that I can get through there with less worry and more assuredness. However, there are pitfalls all along the way; so, I'm not even dreaming of getting done, yet. All I know is that I'm going to keep trying so that I can make the grade and have something for you to show for it. So, here I come, Blytheville! With love, as always, George. (2/13/44)

Neilson in cockpit of BT 13, Basic Flight Training plane with closable canopy.



Army brothers George (left) and Bill or Junior (right). The Neilson brothers stayed in close touch during their time in the army.

Chapter 10

Advanced Flight Training

Blytheville Army Air Field
Blytheville, Arkansas

Assault on Fortress Europe

The beaches of Italy were red with American and British blood in the summer of 1943 when the Allies invaded the soft underbelly of the continent. In July, Allied troops, having emerged victorious in the deserts of northern Africa, landed on Sicily. After Sicily fell in September, the western Allied forces pushed up through the long *boot* of Italy. The locus of the ground war in the ETO began to widen to the southern flank of the Reich, including Italy, Austria, and the Balkans. The German line retreated northward to the Gustav Line south of Rome, headquartering at a fortified position in the historic abbey at Monte Cassino. The Allies bombed and destroyed the Monte Cassino redoubt in February 1944, driving the Germans north of the Gothic Line, two hundred miles north of Rome where the defensive front remained throughout the winter and spring of 1944.[1]

The Anglo-American day and night aerial assault on the German fatherland continued. The number of planes and personnel required to inflict significant damage was far greater than planners had anticipated, as some raids involved upward of a thousand planes with staggering losses. The RAF Bomber Command lost 5,881 heavy bombers in the winter of 1943–44. One out of three Allied bomber crewmen was lost, a figure much higher than ground and sea forces suffered.[2] Murray[3] compared the attrition of air crews and aircraft in the war with Nazi Germany to the attrition of ground forces in the trenches of World War I:

> There was one issue that the RAF and the US Army Air Force got right and the Luftwaffe wrong: the Battle of Britain underlined the absolute need not only for front-line strength, but for a large production base with an adequate flow of replacement crews. By the second half of 1943 the Americans were turning out 1,000 four-engine bombers per month, while the British produced 600 per month. In the end – ironically in view of the pre-war claims of air theorists – the air war would come to resemble the worst of the First World War's attrition warfare, except that now it was the attrition of expensive machines, officers, and aircrew.

The Luftwaffe suffered from destruction of its manufacturing plants by Allied bombing, and even more critically from pilot attrition. Twenty percent of Germany's flying force was lost each month from February through May 1944. The average survival rate for a Luftwaffe fighter pilot was three weeks of deployment following minimal hours of training in their combat aircraft. Many pilots could barely take off and land their planes, and they were running a heavy accident rate.[4] By D-Day, the Luftwaffe ceased to exist as a significant war-changing threat. Still, it continued to harass Allied bomber fleets with its fighters, bringing down aircraft on nearly every Allied mission for the remainder of the war. Nazi Germany's industrial diffusion system continued to produce planes for the Luftwaffe in large numbers despite the aerial destruction of their urban plants. However, they simply did not have enough qualified men to fly these aircraft. The Allied war on the Reich's synthetic and petroleum fuel refineries resulted in serious fuel shortages. Meanwhile, the United States was able to replace bombers and men as fast as they were lost with its functionally limitless production capacity. With the Luftwaffe's fighters grounded, Allied bomber crews had to still contend with lethal flak fields on the bomb runs. In a move to save morale among the civilian population, Hitler rerouted flak defenses from

industrial sites to cities. Large numbers of women (referred to as flakhelferin) "manned" flak cannons in defense of the German homeland.[5]

This was the panorama of the war in Europe in the lead-up to D-Day. There were massive struggles ahead, and not a single Allied soldier had yet broached the Atlantic Wall, the 1,500-mile-long network of German defensive fortifications on the Atlantic coast of France and Norway. But the German war machine was also being pushed back from all directions.

ADVANCED FLYING TRAINING SCHOOL, BLYTHEVILLE AFB, BLYTHEVILLE, ARK.

Blytheville, on the banks of the Mississippi, was another temporary base: tarpaper-covered wooden barracks and [a] rather somber atmosphere. Incidentally, considering the concentration of training in the *13 weeks at each level of flight training, and the lack of attractiveness of the nearby cities, we hardly ever went off the base for recreation. When a holiday occurred, we tried to find a local restaurant, as an alternative to the base mess-hall.

At this Advanced school, we encountered still additional phases to military flying: formation-flying, cross-country flights (day and night), instrument flying training. Here was the place where it would finally be determined if the cadets would graduate, get their "wings," and be commissioned as officers—2nd lieutenants.

The airplanes assigned to Blytheville were the AT-9, made by Curtiss Aircraft Co. It was a twin-engine craft, where the pilot and the co-pilot sat side-by-side. It also had retractable landing wheels and instruments for night-flying and for blind-flying, without looking out the window. All of these aspects were the new phases, at this final stage of training.

I became a little less intense at this stage, because my instructor, Lt. **Leonard Pendell, was low-keyed and pleasant, different from the previous instructors. He was also conscientious, though not a dominant-willed person. I felt comfortable and began to enjoy things. Flying a two engine plane did not make things

much more complicated, though there were obviously a few more gadgets to be concerned with.

The ground school training, especially the "Link" Trainer became all the more crucial, at Advanced. For, we had to learn, on the ground, to fly certain procedures that we would be expected to accomplish in the air. This "Link" Trainer experience was critical since we would finally be tested to get rated as instrument pilots or not. If we did not succeed with instrument flying, we would not graduate. In the air, the instrument flying was accomplished with [the] aid of a "hood" to eliminate the view from the pilot's window, while the instructor could see from his window. In the mind of the pilot-trainee, coordinating the Link Trainer on the ground, or the actual plane in the air was a real challenge of hand, foot, and eye because the sensations of the plane often give you different signals as to what attitude the plane is in. If you believe your personal sensations, you can easily get into trouble, in instrument flying.

One of the most vivid recollections, at Blytheville, was my first night-time cross-country trip, when we [were] assigned a 400 miles round-trip from Blytheville to Little Rock. Bear in mind, that [it] is a different matter to identify things on the ground, the size of cities, distance, etc. To this point, we had not had much experience in night-flying, and none on a cross-country basis. My co-pilot for this trip was a "student officer," a commissioned army officer who had been selected for flight training, and was going through flight training while maintaining his grade as an officer. However, his "rank" for the purpose of flight training was the same as mine, "cadet."

As the flight outbound developed, I was a little puzzled as to getting instruments, etc. coordinated so that I would be on course for Little Rock. As I sought a little assistance from my co-pilot, the student-officer, as was his duty to perform, seemed to "pull rank" on me, as if he was my instructor. He started to criticize what I was doing, without offering any constructive suggestions. Actually, his duty was to be the navigator, but, he did not put himself in the mood to contribute. This provided a few uncomfortable moments until we got on course and things settled down. I got myself

oriented, with the ground light-line lights and code-signals; and we successfully made the trip to Little Rock and return.

On one other occasion, during my first night-time training orientation with an instructor, I started the final approach to the field, ignoring the loud warning horn that was blaring into my ear. Finally, but not belatedly, it dawned on me that the wheels were not down (the cause of the horn). When I reached for the switch to put them down, the instructor leaned over to me and said, "Yes, we put the wheels down at night just as we do in the daytime. Take five stars." Stars cost $1.00 each and went to a slush fund for other cadets and myself, for recreation.

The Advance[d] training curriculum proved to be the easiest as my confidence built up and my fear of not being able to perform dissipated. The biggest challenge was to pass the Instrument Flying Test, to qualify for an instrument rating. Once one passed this test, you had it made.

Graduation: a set of pilot wings, a 2nd Lt. Commission, officer's uniforms—all accumulated as the climax of 14 months of Basic and Cadet pre-flight and flight training, on April 15, 1944 at Blytheville, Arkansas. Naturally, this was exciting. Achieving this was all the more exciting and rewarding to me because I had never envisioned my ability to fly airplanes, especially at the time I enlisted in the Army Air Corps. So, this was the first of more-to-come challenges to accomplish things I had never dreamed of doing, or recognized as opportunities that would eventually confront me, things that couldn't be done, but had to be. (G.H.N., 1991)[6]

*The length of the training phases varied. Primary, Basic, and Advanced were scheduled for nine weeks each.
**pseudo name

Each of the three phases of flight training presented substantial challenges for George. This was so not only because each stage used a more complex aircraft but because of a phenomenon that did not enter the public vernacular until the late twentieth century: organizational culture. This culture was a multidimensional entity that George described to Ma and Betty in a hundred different

ways. It encompassed the kind of relationships between officers, instructors, and cadets, rules and restrictions on the men, military versus civilian protocol, religious services, stories and rumors, and countless other factors that shaped the experience of the men. The net result of these variables was that each time a cadet moved from one training center to another, it was like joining a new army. Contrary to the civilian image of a military organization as a giant, inhuman machine (referred to by soldiers as the green machine), this organizational culture varies from post to post and requires an adjustment by the participant.

The pattern of ups and downs George established at earlier stages of training played out on schedule at Blytheville. It was as if each change in the process put George in a box that he had to fight his way out of, growing stronger each time. As in previous phases, the energy Neilson derived from succeeding following an initial struggle carried the young man to fruitful completion of Advanced.

The low part of the emotional cycle George experienced, arising from the characteristic slow start, had some basis in the training structure. Two training classes (including pairings of 44C, 44D, and 44E) overlapped at each base. During the first half of the nine weeks, the focus was on getting the upper class its required air hours while the lower class marked time on the ground. When the upper class shipped, the situation was reversed, and George's class had priority for planes. Winter weather shut down flying on many days, which aggravated the problem, pushing more and more training hours into the last few weeks of the phase. When George and his colleagues had to sit in the ready room for hours, even days on end without "going up," a discouraging malaise set in. At each station, George's inner engine did not get fully warmed up until the upper class graduated, and the push was on to get 44D through the mill. Whether he fully recognized this cycle in the present is uncertain, but in hindsight he seemed to be able to identify it.

George was anxious to get through his training, become a pilot, and get commissioned, but at no point in the first year did he

indicate a desire to go into combat. He expressed no hatred for the Axis peoples, nor any desire to deliver death and destruction from the air, but rather viewed his military service as a duty and a chance to bring honor to his mother and family. It was not a matter of patriotism or even camaraderie, at least during the pre-combat months in the AAF. George possessed a quality that, aside from his intellectual prowess, would serve him well in the coming eighteen months. This was his level-headedness, his recognition that the mind must rule over the emotional, and his constant awareness that being a so-called hot pilot would lead to an early trip out of this life for himself and his crew. So, drowsiness in ground school notwithstanding, he took all of his training very seriously. He indicated no fear of going to war but must have understood the tremendous responsibility that he would soon bear for the lives of men and equipment in some of the most perilous circumstances imaginable.

The old, sooty stoves still occupy the center of the room

This place is an exact duplicate of Walnut Ridge, as far as the field, the buildings, etc. are concerned. So, the atmosphere is not better at all. The old, sooty stoves still occupy the center of the room. We live in barracks exactly like Walnut Ridge; but, they are divided so that 6 or 8 boys sleep in one room, instead of only one or two. The cadets here are mostly from Walnut Ridge; however, some of them do come from Newport, Ark. and Malden, Mo.

I have done nothing but fill out forms all day long. I've never filled out quite so many forms since I was at Atlantic City. They even had us fill out a form which would be applicable if we graduate as officers.

You mentioned this possibly being a let-down. On the contrary, the A.T.-9 is a "hot" twin-engine trainer. So, if a fellow graduates from here, he can fly the good planes like P-38s, A-20s, or B-25s. In other words, Blytheville is a good twin-engine school. It is only that so many people think that only the best students go to single engine school. We were emphatically advised that they chose the single-engine boys chiefly by

their small stature. Out of our class, only 40 of 300 went to Single Engine. All of us can't be too bad.

Talking about the schedule, the ordinary day starts at 4:45 a.m. + runs 'til 10:00 p.m. The boys say that it is rougher than Walnut Ridge. One thing is for certain, the food is much better although we have to serve ourselves cafeteria style, instead of having so many colored waiters with nothing special to serve. (2/15/44)

They are supposed to treat us like "big brothers"

This morning, we had pictures taken, both as a cadet and with a bar and a pair of wings on, if you can imagine such a thing. This afternoon, we met our instructors. I have a man whom I believe was graduated from here with the class of 44A. He wanted to convince us that he was an old hand at it; but, he almost tripped himself up several times. I think that we will be his first class of cadets. Anyways, Nebel, Nelson, and myself all will have him. There are 7 of us who have the same man.

All the introductory speeches by the directors of flying + training and our own squadron commanders, were actually speeches of welcome and they displayed a willingness to help us all the way. It certainly seems to be a far-cry from the "don't give a rap" attitude of the Basic instructors. They are supposed to treat us like "big brothers" + not officers and cadets. They claim that they will do everything to "show us how."

Well, here's the dope on the A.T.-9. Blytheville is the only field which is still using the A.T.-9! It is the 3rd hottest airplane in use, in this country. The first is the B-26 (flying coffin). The second is the P-38. It seems that you have to be on-the-ball to land a plane at 105 m.p.h. The A.T.-9 will stall out at 90 m.p.h. (2/15/44)

AT-9 was the military term for the Curtiss CW-25 used for Advanced Flight Training. Its common name was the "Jeep." It was a heavier and faster plane than the BT yet had less wing surface. It depended more on speed for lift and less on gliding. The "9" was flown differently and had many gadgets that were new to the AT cadets, including the throttle-controlled manifold pressure, hydraulic flap and wheel controls, emergency hydraulic

wheel-lowering system, ignition and gasoline feed systems, and the wheel instead of the stick. The plane was designed specifically as a trainer for pilots to approximate the flight characteristics of a medium bomber.[7] George added that there were "1,000,000 other things" in a list of nine new equipment pieces he cited. The speed is controlled by adjusting the propeller setting, and the throttles regulate the manifold pressure, which determines the rate at which fuel enters the cylinders. There was a long page of procedures that needed to be followed before you could even take off. So this plane was the next box that the cadet would be placed in to fight his way out of.

Yes, there is some fun to be had in learning to land the "9"

I got my first ride in the A.T.-9 this morning. What an airplane! It was more or less of an orientation ride, to get a glimpse of the 5 auxiliary fields. I take back all I said about there being not too much about all the levers and switches. Holy mackerel! You have to keep a check-list in your hand practically to take the thing off. Boy, your hands are moving all over the place.

No sooner had he given me the controls when I put both hands on the wheel – just like in an auto. Lt. Pendell started laughing and calmly lifted my right arm and put my hand on the throttles which are on a pedestal between the pilot + co-pilot seats. You see, the planes I have been in previously have all the throttles + lever controls convenient for the left hand. But, the twin-engine ships have everything to the right of the pilot seat. So, it will be just like learning to shift car gears with the left hand. There are hundreds of switches, on the panel, on the ceiling, on the floor, everywhere.

The airplane flies nice + smooth, in level flight, but, I must get used to coming in "hot" and gliding "straight down," so to speak. Yes, there is some fun to be had in learning to land the "9". Even the instructors have trouble in demonstrating a good, smooth landing. Oh, well! Everybody was a bit scared today, after getting an eyeful of all the levers and switches + the jockeying that they require.

This afternoon, I took my physical exam, "Flight 64," just like I had at Nashville. We get one of these every 6 months, and it takes all afternoon. Again, the eye exam was predominantly the one of importance. I got by everything except my teeth, which they will want to fool with some more, I suppose. In other words, if I pass the flying end of the deal, I have now had my flight physical. (2/16/44)

A fellow must be an "octopus" to operate one of these aeroplanes

I'm convinced that a fellow must be an "octopus" to operate one of these aeroplanes. I don't think that it is possible for any human being to land the thing, anyway. Today, the instructor was showing me stalls, slow flight and single engine procedure. As soon as the instructor cuts out an engine, you must do the following: 1. Hop on rudders to keep the plane straight. 2. Keep plane at 105 m.p.h. 3. Advance props to 2000 r.p.m. + cut back bad one. 4. Advance throttles to 27" + cut back one which don't work. 5. Turn off cross-feed. 6. Turn engine selector on good engine. Cut switch on bad engine. 7. Trim the airplane to fly with one engine.

Right now, the airplane is nothing but a maze of procedures; and, it is a big puzzle. As far as doing things, it seems like all you do is turn switches + push levers back and forth. I've got one thing pretty well in hand. I've managed to master the procedure for starting the engines, etc. It seems like all we do is memorize this + that. (2/17/44)

It went towards the ground nose first!

In this airplane, you use up so much of the runway in making a landing that it is not usually practical to make a running take-off after a landing. Consequently, with everybody shooting landings just now, the runways and taxi-strips on the auxiliary fields become pretty well clogged. En route from the auxiliary field, he pulled a "single engine" on me. I am no good at all on it, yet. Actually, I believe that if both engines quit in the A.T.-9, you would not look around for a field; rather than that, you'd look directly beneath you for a field. If there was no field, I'd bail out, (I think) because you sure as heck are not going to glide very far in this

baby. Lt. Pendell cut both engines on the approach for a landing today; immediately, it went towards the ground nose first! (2/18/44)

George was annoyed because Pendell was reluctant to give his students the controls, offering this interpretation:

He does not feel too sure of his own ability, I don't believe, and he wants us to watch him practice a bit before we try it. (2/18/44)

While it is true, in the words of George's brother Bill (Junior), in coaching me as I was about to enter the army in 1972, that in the military you meet "the lowest forms of humanity," it is also true that you meet some of the finest people you will ever know. Wrote George of a colleague:

After P.T., we still had ¾ hour before supper; so, I followed the suggestion of a very religious boy who has been with me since Primary. He is Jack Moy, an Irish, ex-fireman and cop from Bronx, N.Y. He is 27 yrs. old and a very good fellow. So, I followed him to daily mass which takes place at the chapel every day at 5:30. p.m. here.

In general, they treat us more like humans around here

In general, they treat us more like humans around here, although they expect the same things as other places. They seem to assume that we can do the things expected without all the "boy scout" treatment that characterizes this training. That deal of getting a haircut each week still bothers me.

I can see myself entering upon a doldrum period which precedes the confidence-feeling in one of these airplanes. So, you can expect to hear the same song and dance that came from Walnut Ridge + Helena. (2/18/44)

On Saturday afternoon, I had my 4th ride in the "rocket-ship." Yes, the A.T.-9, and there are only a few left, is a hot plane and the instructors make no bones about introducing you to it, in that light. One instructor, who has flown combat planes, said that if you can land the 9, you won' t

have any trouble with such a plane as the P-38. Instructors who flew the plane in Advanced, like us, and have had a couple of classes in addition, still cannot land the plane on the proverbial "three points." Every day, it is almost common to see buckled wheel struts + broken wheels, as the result of hard landings.

I did get my first hour of Link, before they handed out the rain-checks, however. The first lesson was an elementary exercise on "bracketing the beam," the method by which you find yourself and fly into a radio controlled field, when + if you get lost at night or become entrapped in inclement weather conditions. (2/20/44)

The topic of flying to a radio beam was accompanied with two pages of listed procedures and a diagram.

I didn't figure on having anything to do with a girl

It might interest you to know that the girl from Montgomery [Estelle Smith, or Smitty] has not written for over a month. It was, I think, because I rather headed-off any suggestion that I thought she had on she being my girlfriend or something. I had an idea that she wanted a "catch;" so, I told her I didn't figure on having anything to do with a girl until I had myself situated in civilian life, you know, boat, job, money, etc.

I learned today that we'll be getting plenty of time in the good old A.T.-9, barring accidents, because the 70 hours "minimum time" is only pilot time. You also get 35 or 40 hours of co-pilot time in this wagon. (2/20/44)

In aircraft rec., they have moving pictures of how German + Jap planes will look as they are going by or coming at you. The Japs have a new Zero which looks just like the Mustang, by the way. So, we are actually getting into foreign planes in that oft repeated + so often too dreary course. In navigation, we will perfect our methods of planning courses + computing with the E-6B "confuser."

In pilot training, they assume that you'll have no navigator, except for the complicated instruments. You see, in navigation, they don't assume that the navigator will have no pilot. In reality, most of us will be in

mufti-engine planes + will have navigators, if + when we graduate. But, the pilot must learn to check on his navigator for the pilot is responsible for the airplane. They gave us books on bombardiering + accuracy bombing, so, evidently, they'll give us a course on bombing.

We had P.T. at 11:15, a real rigorous drill in the gym (just like W.R.). All the time we grunt + groan through calisthenics, we can peer at a 25 foot pair of pilot's wings hanging over the crude gym's stage, 8 long, hard weeks away. (2/21/44)

At this point in pilot training, the instructors are just a few steps ahead of the students. George's instructor entered the army two days after he did. He went directly to Nashville without the CTD phase. Lt. Pendell was "one of the boys," and made little pretense of being an expert in the AT-9.

So, he is willing to help us like he was a brother. We hardly treat him like an officer. It is not required, you see. So, he spent the day telling us about all the long cross-country night flying, fires in the engines, belly landings, emergency hydraulic procedures, buzzing the tower to let them examine your wheels when in trouble, etc. We even talked about bailing out, crash landings and everything conceivable. He gave us a few tips on how to treat "Square Deal" Keefe, our tactical officer, how to treat the P.T. men, when to complain about food, etc. In other words, we spent the day learning things about the post, in general.

During the course of the day, I visited the Blytheville tower, at which there is a 24 hour vigil. All day + night, an enlisted radio man guards 6 radios + a complex system of signals by which transient planes locate themselves, call-in passing, or land by. It was very interesting to see the maze of weather instruments, the radio-correction finder, + all the signals which are used, day or night, to help the airmen. (2/21/44)

Well, the weather was not too inviting in this section of Arkansaw, as we all celebrated George Birthington's Wash day by going through our regular routine. However, the 3rd day of inclement weather kept us on the ground, holding down the chairs in the ready-room. (2/22/44)

Cadet Neilson worked the Link trainer which he described as "an ordeal, although we get training which is almost priceless in value." (2/22/44) There were long days of ground school in February as the cadets delved into the complexities of navigation, code, and aircraft identification. George gained some respect for some of the Axis powers' aircraft.

Our planes are so much better than the others

The instructor says that the British authorities admit that the F.W. 190 (German fighter) is the greatest piece of machinery they have ever seen. Naturally, you won't see that in print anywhere, because our planes are so much better than the others, you see. Right now, the views of the *Heinies' and the Japanese planes look like Egyptian hieroglyphics to us. But, we will soon learn them from all angles. (It says right here, in small print.) It seems that we have named all the Jap Zeros + Mitsubishi bombers with names like "Zeke," "Hap," "Val," "Sally," "Betty," etc. They all look like combinations of our newest airplanes. The Japs try to combine the best characteristics of all ours and the British planes and try to produce a composite which is supposed to be a super plane. However, they do employ much armor and incorporate self-sealing fuel tanks in their new planes, now.

I got an intricate letter from Mattera who is completing his bombardiering training at Deming, New Mexico. He and the other 3 boys from my class at Grove City, who were made bombardiers are currently dropping practice loads onto targets which represent ships, oil-tanks, etc. (2/22/44)

*Slang - Germans

I will try my best and place all my hopes in prayer

It was almost a pleasure to have P.T. this morning; for it was like a day in May, back home. They allowed us to play touch football, and we played as if we wanted to, for a change.

During the course of my ride today, Pendell decided that I was not keeping a good enough watch on the airspeed during our trips around the

traffic pattern at Manilla Field. I kept allowing the speed to get low, which did not seem to be of any too great significance or importance. Yet, when we got on the ground, he started laughing over the dangers of flying too slow and thought that I should write a 750 word composition on "why I should keep my airspeed at 120 in the pattern." So we are all still in the "struggling" period, where everybody is trying to find a way to land the airplane, still finding it difficult to watch the 23 dials on the instrument panel, still trying to think of which of the 18 levers should be used for what, and still trying to decide which of the 36 different switches turns on what device. It appears that you have to learn to fly these airplanes by being up there by yourself in it. So, they simply are trying to cram sufficient ability + procedure into us so that we can get the plane safely into the air.

We almost had some excitement today, when one of the field's "Helldivers," combat ships for officer's use, could only get one wheel down. They say it's fun to land wheels-up, or better still, one down + one up. Invariably, a lot of damage gets done to the plane; but, nobody usually gets hurt, because you are supposed to be prepared to leap out, as soon as the plane hits. Believe me, these fancy folding wheels provide plenty of headaches + cause plenty of trouble + damage to the Air Corps equipment. Hardly a day goes by when somebody does not have wheel trouble.

Now that Lent is here, I hope that this season can see me successfully through this training. I will try my best + place all my hopes in prayer, as I have been trying. (2/23/44)

An "old stove league" meeting

The warm air mass which has covered this area since Saturday provided another day of moisture + cloudy conditions, thereby making our a.m. flying period more or less of an "old stove league" meeting. Sitting around the ready room from 6:00 a.m. until 1:00 p.m. is not exactly a joke, I must say. Certain parts of the body do get a trifle, shall we say, irritated?

Between our first two + last two classes, we received our yearly doses of small-pox and tetanus injections. Boy, it always scares me to see the way the medical dept. allows enlisted men to wield those hypo. needles.

It seems as if they have a new man on the job, every time we get ours. (2/24/44)

Near the conclusion of his February 25 letter, George broached the subject of preserving his letters, something that mother Neilson had apparently long since undertaken on her own initiative.

By the way, if you think of it, will you again remind me of what record you are making of the letters which I write? The idea I have been getting, lately, is that maybe some sort of notation of this training might be worth looking at, or pointing at in awe, later on.
(2/25/44)

Nothing but drink, drink, drink

Well, I spent from Saturday, at 8:00 until tonight at 9:00, in the town of Blytheville, which, incidentally, is just about the finest town that I have seen in Arksansaw. As far as what I did goes, I can't think of anything too exciting as I sit here in meditation. As usual I went into town with the sole idea of getting out of this army atmosphere for a few hours. In that objective, I was successful, if nothing else. I could sum these places all up by saying that it's nothing but drink, drink, drink that seems to provide any pleasure for the boys. I am still always at a bit of a loss to amuse myself while the rest of the boys are "soaking it up." (2/27/44)

Bad weather continued to spoil flying time the last ten days in February. George expressed some fear that he would forget what he had learned by the time the weather relented. He was enthused about a new subject in the ground curriculum: air reconnaissance, or scouting enemy activity.

Meanwhile Ma and Betty had made a trip to the White Mountains, the family's traditional get-away spot in New Hampshire or *Na'hampsha* as Bostonians say it. George longed for the time when he would be able to join them there, but he wrote less and less of yearning for a leave, having resigned himself that it was

out of the picture for some time. His summary of life at Blytheville AAF is hardly tantalizing:

There's nothing else exciting to report from these muddy precincts today. It is getting to be a matter of being uneasy until we start flying again. Until then, the rest of the story seems like a dreary affair, with nothing but these boring quarters to excite us. It has been quite a contrast, this month. In January, I flew 61 hours, while I only flew 6 hours in February. So, you can imagine what March will have to be, in order to catch up with that elusive schedule. (2/28/44)

The men were chomping at the bit to get checked-out and start flying more. George explained that before the cadets could solo, things would move slowly as instructor time, as well as airplanes, were limited.

All I have to do is convince Pendell that I can sit it down without killing us, as if he were sufficiently qualified to be a judge. He has yet to show me a good landing; so I'm still working under illusions of how to land the A.T.-9.

We got a glimpse of the new model B-24, this morning. One of the new ones with the power turret in the nose was on the field. The new model has a power-rotating turret sitting directly over the bombardier's head in the nose. Besides that, the engine *nacelles in the wings are oval-shaped, the air scoops being on each side of the round engines. Boy! When that baby moved down the runway, it looked exactly like a big freight car on three wheels, with wings on it. (2/29/44)
*housings

Well, there's nothing important to say except that this is the end of the month and I'm broke, tonight. So, I'll close and hope all is well at home. (2/29/44)

Last week, U.S. lost 500 medium + heavy bombers

There has been a basketball tournament at the gymnasium, all day, amongst the officers + enlisted men's teams of Walnut Ridge, Malden,

Newport + Blytheville. Some of us went over after supper, tonight, to watch the Blytheville officers trounce Walnut Ridge 55-35.

In our aircraft recognition course, we had a test today on views of the Jap + German planes at 1000 yds. You can imagine how hard it was to pick out the planes. It was average to get 15 out of the 30, correct.

Last week, U.S. lost 500 medium + heavy bombers, it might interest you to know. (3/1/44)

Big Week and Berlin

This little bombshell that George dropped at the end of the letter of March 1 was referring to "Big Week," a six-day-long air campaign of unparalleled scale over Nazi Germany. The targets were selected to destroy Germany's aircraft production capability by striking at its great factories and essential feeder plants. The opening act was the Brunswick-Leipzig area, eighty miles south of Berlin on February 20, 1944. One hundred fifty-three enemy fighters were destroyed while the AAF lost twenty-one bombers and four fighters, manned by 210 of the 11,000 fliers who flew the mission. In the following five days, including another visit to the dreaded Regensburg-Schweinfurt area, losses rose alarmingly, with the Eighth and Fifteenth losing 20 percent of their forces. Despite the great destruction of production plants on the ground, the industry rebounded to its pre-Big Week capacity in two months. The same was true of the synthetic oil bombing raids.

The next target following Big Week was as formidable as any previous one: Berlin. Bristling with 750 flak guns, the Nazi capital was the most heavily defended city in the world. The cost of the morale victory of striking at the heart of the Reich to the US AAF alone was sixty-nine bombers and crews. As the ground invasion at Normandy approached, the air war escalated into an all-out crusade to destroy German air power. Yet with unconscionable cost to the Allies in men and machines, there was little to celebrate in the spring of 1944 as the Luftwaffe began to crumble and the Allies gained control of the skies over Europe.[8]

Baiting Missions

Miller[9] held the view that the US air command in early 1944 resorted to a strategy of sending out bombers with the primary purpose of drawing the Luftwaffe's fighter squadrons into the air, while destruction of strategic targets was secondary in importance. Knowing the superiority of the American long-range fighters in bringing down their German counterparts (in the Battle of Berlin, P-51 Mustangs took down eight German planes for each one lost), missions were sent deep into the Reich following the same routes in successive days. The idea was to actually enable the Luftwaffe to find and engage the bomber streams and their escorts. Quoting Miller,[10]

> For the remainder of March and into April, Spaatz and Doolittle continued to force the fight, sending out heavies on immense radar raids—baiting missions, actually—in blinding weather that made accurate bombing impossible. In April alone, the Eighth Air Force lost 409 heavy bombers, the most it would lose in any single month of the air war, and the Fifteenth's losses shot up from ninety-nine in March to 214.

From December 1943 to May 1944, the United States lost over 2,600 heavy bombers and 980 fighters manned by 18,400 airmen who became casualties of those doomed planes. Those were desperate times, and the air command was less concerned with casualty rates and the purity of their motives than the all-crucial objective of destroying the Luftwaffe prior to the invasion of France.[11]

I'm just about at the end of my rope, as far as waiting in the ready room is concerned. I've not ridden for several days. Boy, my patience is really tried to its limit, just now. (3/2/44)

They have a meat wagon and a fire truck where the boys are shooting landings

The monotony of not flying was decidedly relieved this morning when I rode from 8:00 'til 9:30 with "Little Boy Blue" Pendell (He's only a kid and very green as a pilot). We went straight to Manilla auxiliary field to shoot about 5 landings on the over-all grass field. To land this "go-cart," you have to make a long, 3 or 4 mile approach from 1200' indicated altitude. In a "rat-race" where everybody lands side by each, like on a grass field, you have to keep looking around and be on the watch for that dangerous and much respected *"prop-wash" from other planes. Anyhow, I walked away from all of the landings; so, in the A.T.-9, they were good landings. What a baby to land! Sometimes one wing wants to stall out before the other, sometimes you come in too steep + she balloons as you try to round out the approach. There's nothing anybody can tell you about landing it, you've got to find out yourself; and, everybody has a different way. Anyhow, Pendell decided to give me a chance to "soso;" so, we pulled up on Manilla Field and exchanged seats, for the ride back.

To give you an idea of how they respect the "Curtis-cartwheeler," they have a **"meat-wagon" and a fire truck in the center of the auxiliary fields where the boys are shooting landings.

Pendell was talking with the service pilot who ferried the P-51 in here. He said that the 51 would land like a charm, compared to the 9. He said that the A.T.-9 was the only plane which gave him difficulty in checking out. When he took off this morning, all the instructors stood + watched with their tongues hanging out. To stand + watch a P-51 is the most beautiful sight you could hope to see!

So, the grind will begin to pick up momentum and the fun will begin. Our squadron will fly tomorrow + Sunday; so, I will not have to worry about open-post, this weekend. (3/3/44)

*air turbulence from the rotating propellers of a nearby plane
**military slang for ambulance

George was scheduled to go up with Earl "Pop" Nelson on Saturday but as they were waiting for the tower to send them up, winds picked up and approached gale velocity. There was some

indecision in the tower and they let sixteen planes go before shutting down.

So, Pop + I got the old windmills turning + tried like mad to call the tower; but, our efforts were in vain as the 16 ships got checked out before we could contact W.K 99 (the tower frequency). Thwarted again, we cut the engines + stood by a little longer. (3/5/44)

Before long, flying was called off and the tower scrambled to land all the planes, which were being tossed about in the gale. Neilson and Nelson watched the landing show from the runway, glad that they did not "get into the mess." The next morning, the pair got aloft, but before they reached two thousand feet, they were into soup and could not even see the field.

Pop scraped the mud off the wheels as we lurched over the fence

No field, no nuthin'! At 1250', we couldn't see two feet out of this window. Imagine, you couldn't see the field, after just taking off. Anyhow, Pop made a large circle + we managed to catch a faint glimpse of the runways. Then, Pop turned on the navigation + passing lights, turned to a course of 300 degrees + proceeded towards Hornersville at 1500' – on instruments. Yes, my first solo ride in the "Curtis Firecracker," on instruments. My! My! By talking ourselves into confidence, we arrived at Hornersville, okay; then we were soon in a rat-race of a traffic pattern, from which 15 or 20 planes were shooting landings. Hornersville being a grass field like Helena, we landed all over it.

Now for the landings! Talk about "sweating" it out! You ought to ride one of these rickshaws. None of us is sure of how to land it; so, you can imagine! Pop made 7 landings; but, I made 8 of them, just sitting + watching him. Maybe we didn't bounce! Maybe! However, I'll put that positively + say we bounced like hell! The tension would be such that I'd have to reach over + act like I was helping him correct for the landing, although I was only making believe! What a life!

Then, we were taking off from the center of the field, eastward, + directly over the town. No sooner did we get over the fence, + we always

just barely did, when we'd be buzzing the town at about 50 feet. Once, Pop scraped the mud off the wheels as we lurched over the fence.

Earl helped me pray her down

Anyhow, we changed seats at 9:15, so I was in the driver's seat. Earl helped me pray her down twice, and they were pretty futile attempts I must admit. Finally, we got into the pattern + we couldn't hardly see each other, when they told us to return home. However, I decided to put another one in, first. And, then, I made a beautiful, and lucky one. Earl was so worked up + relieved at the outcome of that ordeal that he said, "That's just how it should be done!" – in all sincerity + with his hand waving at me in a fatherly tone in his voice. All I did was laugh at him for a while.

I don't know whether you'd laugh or cry to see one of these glazed bricks dancing a jig down the runway. If you can visualize a set of Chinese firecrackers going off all over a narrow sidewalk, you have a vivid picture of an A.T.-9 landing on a broad, 150' wide, runway. Same proportion, same gyrations.

Tomorrow, we begin instrument flying, with a different set of instructors. This being the crucial course, I'll have to knuckle-down from the word go, in this game. I see that one of the boys from the club is at Spence Field, Ga. (single engine Advanced). He's only beginning, just like the pre-pre-pre-pre-pre-flight boys here. Well, I'll seal it up now + remember, I think of you always. (3/5/44)

George's squadron, including Murphy, Nebel, Nelson, Moy, Neal, and Morgan, was divided into two groups that would alternate instrument and regular flying (referred to as transition). Jack Moy, Jim Neal, and George were in "Y" group while the others were in "Z" group. The first ride George had under this system was a team ship with Neal.

A little game of tag over the slopes and knolls of the Arkansas marsh lands

This ride was a dual ride and it was my first ride in the navigation phase of the program, here. It was a low-altitude cross-country flight,

which was supposed to simulate a reconnaissance mission, at low altitude. We flew a 5 leg, almost criss-cross course to Corning, Mo; via Poplar Bluff to the town of Rombauer, Mo.; to Advance, Mo. + return by way of Donophan, Missouri. It was a 242 mile jaunt, and today's visibility was, for the first time worthy of note. You could actually see the ground two or three miles ahead. Pendell wanted to fly it; so, he let me sit in the pilot's seat + figure the E.T.A.'s, the courses, etc. Besides, we overtook another plane and had a little game of tag over the slopes + knolls of the Arkansas marsh lands + Missouri foothills. As soon as we were in the air, I offered Pendell one of innumerable candy bars that we all eat while flying; but, he broke out a still-warm toasted cheese sandwich, which he got at the officers lunch stand, instead; so, we were fixed well for food. Between Rombauer + Advance, we were rat-racing up the Black River Valley, swampy bayou regions, on the heels of a 40 mile tail-wind from 300 degrees. We were only about 50' up + we had hills towering above us, on each side, all the way. Since both planes were near together, there was that temptation for a race; so, while we were out miles from any towns or civilization, we let loose. Pendell had 24" of manifold pressure + 160 m.p.h. air speed, or 200 m.p.h. ground speed, while pursuing another instructor over the tree-tops. It's a lot of fun at times, flying at that height.

Worse than a choppy day in a boat

When we got to Advance, the Primary planes from Cape Giradear, Mo. were using it for landings; so we didn't land but we returned on course to Doniphan, over about 70 miles of forest wasteland. This leg found us heading right back into rough, + sharp wind. It was a bumpy + worse than a choppy day in a boat, on this leg. En route, the instructor in the other plane could not resist the temptation to buzz a forest lookout station, almost taking the crow's nest off its perch.

I learned quite a bit, since we had to visit the weather office, obtain a clearance, etc. before we could go. I saw the workings of how the complicated radio control room works; telephones, mikes, head-sets, etc. receiving news of planes passing over the field, training planes taking off + landing, cross country clearances, etc. Everything is reported from the radio towers to the dispatcher in the radio room; and his staff records it

on blackboards, charts etc. Ultimately, they know just what planes are in the air, where every transient plane within many miles is or is due to be, etc. You couldn't believe that they can keep a constant check on all the planes that are coming + going, all day. (3/7/44)

Incidentally, Blytheville's instrument school rates second to none through any of the 3 training commands in the country. That, I knew beforehand. It is run as a separate organization, almost. We'll get 15 hours of ground instruction on instruments, 6 hours or so on basic instruments in the air, and a minimum of 4 hours on radio + range procedure. At the instrument school, they have quite a program for getting the boys to be mentally alert. Their scheme includes "bracing," holding you at attention while talking to you, daily personal inspections, etc. I guess that a fellow really has to jump around at that place. They told us, however, that every instrument instructor is specifically ordered not to yell at you in the air. They try to do everything to make you relax up there. (3/8/44)

One lecture dealt with the kinesthetic senses and the semi-circular canals of the ears "which cause so much trouble to the normal person in flying instruments." (3/8/44) The men are trained to ignore these senses and believe only their eyes and instruments. In one recent case, two cadets who took off at night on instruments falsely sensed that something was wrong. The pilot swung his head quickly to his left towards the bright hangar lights. This movement, along with poor depth perception, gave the pilot the impression that his wing was low. Reacting to his feelings instead of the instruments, he attempted to raise the left wing. Since the right wing was already up, he went into a spiral and the plane disintegrated. Fortunately, both men escaped with just a few cuts.

All the 44C boys have been running around like mad, lately, "logging hat-times." That is, they've been wearing their "h.p." hats around at night. In fact, you start wearing your officer's hats as soon as you are upper-class (that is, around the barracks at night). Today, all the 44C boys were

running from the tailor shop with newly pressed + fitted officer's clothes, in preparation for the big day on Sunday. (3/8/44)

George learned that ninety percent of the U.S. pilots that were in combat at the time he was in AT had received three and four hours of instruments, whereas he already had received sixteen hours with Link in addition to that. As the war proceeded, the AAF training program proved far superior to that of the Luftwaffe. Luftwaffe pilots were not trained in instruments. In the spring of 1944, the Luftwaffe was losing fifteen to twenty percent of its pilots per month. Although they had a cadre of pilots who had gained so much experience in combat that they were almost unbeatable, the vast majority of German pilots were sent up with a fraction of the flying hours that US pilots had, which was around four hundred. Sending up men who could barely take off and land their planes to fight the seasoned US air crews was virtually a death sentence.[12]

The program today is supposed to be 300% more comprehensive than the days when the A.C. was "exclusive" + a "superman." (3/8/44)

I received your letter, this afternoon. It sure is good that Bob is enjoying himself and having a good visit at home this time. I wish that I could be home to help fight over the mustard pickle and the "end of the loaf." Maybe I can get in on that deal, before too long, huh? (3/9/44)

More charts, procedures, and headaches

Today, in ground school, we had one hour of pictures and diagrams of the hydraulic systems of airplanes, of which we have already had many, previously. In other words, they want you to know what happens when the wheels don't come down! As if that would help, you understand! Then, we had another hour in which we used a direction-finding chart to plot a course from Columbia, S.C. to Memphis, with the use of the radio compass – more charts, procedures, and headaches!

I sure hope to get some time in this plane before night-flying begins. It's a little nerve-wracking trying to land the thing on the concrete in the day time, say nothing of trying to grease it onto the "smoke haze" + invisible runway which usually lies 3 or 4 feet above the real one. (3/10/44)

George's eagerness to fly continued to be frustrated by inclement weather, equipment problems, and because his squadron instructor did not seem to know how to get planes and fields scheduled for his men. Lt. Pendell's students continued to get pushed off the flight schedule by upperclassmen and 44D students with more aggressive instructors. Although Pendell continually reassured Neilson that he would get the time he needed before the nine weeks were up, the delays caused George no end of frustration and in his own words, "anxiety." Statements like the following appeared in letters to Ma in February and March:

Anyhow, Pendell says that we need not worry about getting our time. He says that if + when the time comes, we'll fly morning, noon and night, 6 or 8 hours a day if necessary. (3/13/44)

Day after day, the cadets were up at 4:45 a.m. and on the flight line by 7:00, only to sit in the ready room most of the day. Consequently, in the last two weeks at Blytheville, Pendell's cadets had to fly around-the-clock to get finished.

You never saw a happier and more proud bunch of boys

We all started for town about noon just to get away from the field for a while. For, having partaken of a rather tasteless lunch in one of the local hash houses, I was off on a "routine" street-parading time with the rest of the boys, all of whom had nothing else to do. Finally, at 3:30, I dropped into one of the town's two movie emporiums to see "Thunderbird Field." It is the story of a R.A.F. cadet at Primary training at a field in Arizona where they have all three phases of the training for British, Chinese + some

U.S. cadets. It certainly was amusing to be able to sit back and laugh at the truly + realistically depicted story of that always-to-be-remembered saga.

After I got out of the show, the streets seemed to be filled with newly pressed uniforms, shining brass bars and glittering pilot's wings. Yes, 300 new pilots had been commissioned at a brief ceremony in the gymnasium at 2:00. You never saw a happier and more proud bunch of boys. Can you blame them? We were throwing them salutes from all angles because we know that they were getting a big kick out of the proceedings. Part of their graduation rewards, in addition to the bars and wings, includes two leather jackets, a pair of flying *togs, $250. for uniforms and a nice traveling bag.

More than at any previous time, I feel raring to go and fly

It's worth working for, don't you think? Now that I'm on the last leg to that same goal, I actually feel confident and eager to get there. More than at any previous time, I feel raring to go and fly. I'm beginning to get the itch to want to fly all the time, something I didn't have at Basic or Primary. I'm going to do my level best to do a good job, you can bet on that!

As Nebel, Nolan and myself ate our supper in the "Rustic Inn," surrounded by a swarm of new second lieutenants, we could not help but have a feeling of inferiority and slinky humbleness. At the same time, it made me grit my teeth + pinch myself and say, "I can't afford to miss this, now." You can't help but look at these boys and spur yourself on to the last and toughest of all the "stretches. (3/12/44)

*Flying togs is a waist-length insulated leather jacket. In the modern era of heated cockpits, flying togs are sold mainly for motorcycle riding.

The humor of the following segment lies in the lengthy narratives and lectures on flying which occupied some 90% of George's letters home.

Lastly, I received a letter from Smitty at Montgomery. All she seems to do is relate her routine work as a nurse + says a lot of things that mean nothing to me, or herself either.

Well, as I close tonight, my mind is filled with renewed incentives to go over the top +"bring home the bacon," that silver + gold stuff, you know. With God's protection, I think I can do it for you, Ma. (3/12/44)

Whatever the basis of the cadet's little diatribe of the previous week, he seemed to have rebounded from it quite remarkably.

In the meantime, I had one hour of co-pilot time, the first thing this morning. I had to sit + bite my nails while Jim Neal, with whom I'm not too well acquainted, yet, made his first solo ride. Maybe you don't think that is a nervous strain. We were taking off + landing into the east at Manilla Field. Each take off took us skimming right over the surface of a big lake, which borders the eastern edge of the field. A forced landing on take-off would surely have spoiled our fun! Anyhow, he made 4 landings + brought her back without too much damage being done. Then, I got in to Pendell's ship + finished the remainder of my dual transition time. (3/13/44)

Torque Jockeys and Meter Readers

Here's another sidelight. The 44C boys got their orders today + prepared to leave on their "leaves." All of those who did not get instructor assignments were assigned to heavy bombers. 100 got B-24s, 50 got B-17s + I don't know about the rest. There were no assignments to medium bombers from this class. All of those who flew the A.T.-9 got first pilots on B-17s + B-24s, while many of the A.T.-10 boys were made co-pilots.

Here's another interpretation of the feelings which exists between single-engine + twin-engine pilots. They call the S.E. men, "Torque Jockeys," while the T.E. men are, "Meter Readers."

Well, I must close and get over to the ground school where we will take the examination which helps them determine whether or not we will become flight officers. It counts 15%, in addition to our ratings at Nashville, Maxwell, Helena, + W. Ridge. I guess that it is more of a formality than anything else. (3/13/44)

Kay Keyser's program is providing the background setting for this letter in case you should be interested. We have a fellow in our room who has a radio, and it is kept on practically every moment that we are in the room. (3/15/44)

Kay Keyser is America's forgotten superstar. He lead a big band that outdrew Glenn Miller and Benny Goodman from 1933-1949, and was known as The Ol' Professor of Swing. One of his songs came from something the chaplain of the USS New Orleans said during the attack at Pearl Harbor, *Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition.*[13]

They'll be filling gas tanks all night long

This morning, I was supposed to ride two hours as a co-pilot for Jim Nolan, who was to practice instrument flying; however, we waited for 1 ½ hours to get gas for our plane. It seems that the gas trucks are manned by pre-pre-pre cadets who are gold-bricking as much as possible (can you blame them?) Consequently, they don't care if you never fly. As for the gas, they'll look the other way when you signal for them. I was getting madder + madder as I ran up + down the ramp in search of some gas. I told one bunch of those "aviation trainees," as they call them, that if we don't fly all our transition in the day time, it will be added on to night flying; then, they'll be filling gas tanks all night long. I even met one of the engineer officers, who has charge of the ground crew, + he was sorry + said it wouldn't happen again. You see, the atmosphere is that everybody on the line is supposed to jump whenever a cadet asks for something to be done to his airplane, be it a crew chief, a ground officer, or ground mechanic.

The Sqdn. Commander came into the ready room + asked who was not scheduled to fly. Nobody but me put up a hand, because they all thought he was looking to give a check ride. I didn't care if he was or not, I wanted to fly! Anyhow, I received a ship + he assigned Murphy as a co-pilot for half the time. I was rewarded, thus, for volunteering. (3/15/44)

Yes, Cadet Neilson broke the first rule of military life: Never volunteer.

Some of the landings which I was experimenting with were really on the griddle

We were landing diagonally across the field, into the Southwest, because of the strong wind from the Southwest. Anyhow, the take-off took us directly over the town of Manilla (3000 people), which has a water tower in the middle of it. Every time we took off, we let the tower push up the wheels, instead of hitting the time lag + letting the pump pull them up. (Yes, we did, honestly!) On the opposite corner of the field, there was Manilla Lake, just in case we under-shot the field. Some of the landings which I was experimenting with bringing in "hot" (110 m.p.h.) were really on the griddle. Boy, I thought we could never stop them from rolling while they were on the ground. One got away from us + I stalled in + bounced sky high. However, the throttles came to my rescue and I executed the "go around" procedure for the first time. You have to be careful in such a predicament to "milk-up the flaps" very slowly as you climb up, or she'll nose downward. You should see what happens when you don't recover from a bad landing, either sheered struts, a nose-over, a folded strut, or torn-off engines. (3/15/44)

Anyhow we had lectures on night flying, Blytheville style, and the use of radio navigation procedures on cross-countries (both day and night). When they start night flying here, they will be using the main field and all of the auxiliary fields at the same time. Furthermore, they will try to do as much of it as possible without radio, to avoid confusion and also to give us practice in using light signals. You see, they have a "biscuit gun" which sends out red, white and green signals. They can aim the thing directly at your plane at night + indicate what you are supposed to do. Then, they have a big white spot light on each runway to check wheels with.

Some fellows have received quite an amount of time while others have not gotten very much. At Basic, I didn't care if I ever flew; but, here I'm

eager to fly but I can't get all the time that I would like so that I can get more of an idea of how to expect things of the A.T.-9. (3/16/44)

I really like to fly the A.T.-9 and enjoy it very much where I couldn't ever really get used to the B.T. I don't suppose that I'll ever get the "knack" of landing her the same way every time. Every landing in the 9 is not simply a new experience in landing, but it is a new experience in life! (3/17/44)

The torrent-stricken trails of Blytheville

Last night, I ventured through the torrent-stricken trails of Blytheville to attend the customary Saturday cinematic attraction of two Wild West "shoot fests" and a serial to top it off. They used enough ammunition in those pictures to kill every German soldier fighting. I saw one "umbrey," with my own eyes, shoot 12 bullets out of a 6-shooter without even batting an eye.

So, I spent the afternoon listening to the radio + writing letters, as I told you. Did you hear Oscar Lemont play "Malequena" on Kostelaenetz' program? It was almost as good as Annie Nigro's, wasn't it? (3/19/44)

Murphy, Nelson, Nebel, Moy + myself each have about 20 hours, as of tonight. In the afternoon, I would have ridden my dual formation with Pendell, had he not gone to Memphis on some mission, foolish or otherwise. As it was, Jack Moy + I divided 2 hours shooting landings in the runways at Steele Auxiliary Field. (3/20/44)

I was up at 3000,' when the enlisted man turned on the radio and the automatic flight-path recorder which recorded everything that I did, in red ink on a chart of the Blytheville range which was on the instructor's desk. In other words, he could see just where I was with respect to the station, simply by watching the red marking on the chart. "Blytheville Radio, this is Army 1-2-3 at 3000' in the eastern quadrant at 1530, over." He replied, "Army 1-2-3, this is Blytheville Radio, you are clear to work the range at 5000'." So, I climbed to 5000' and used the "fade-out" method to come in on the 45 degree inbound beam. When I was on the

beam, I called: "DBL Radio, this is Army 1-2-3 at 5000' on the 45 degree inbound beam at 1540, over." He replied: "You are clear to the station Army 1-2-3." As I approached the cone of silence, I called, "DBL Radio, this is Army 1-2-3 approaching station, over." He replied, "Army 1-2-3, this is DBL Radio. There are too many planes in the traffic pattern for you to let down, at present. You will 'hold' between a leg of the beam + the cone of silence." (3/22/44)

This dialog went on but the fact is that George was not really at five thousand feet or three thousand feet or any other altitude. It all transpired in the Link Trainer. It was a sophisticated and accurate simulation of actual flight conditions and problems.

Today, we had ground school in the morning, with lectures on airplane icing + theory of bombing. They have equipment on tactical airplanes, now, which sprays a liquid along the propellers, in order to prevent icing, even as they rotate at 2,000 r.p.m. What next? (3/24/44)

In addition to full-panel instrument training, the AT cadets also had to learn to fly with a limited group of instruments. George referred to this as "needle-ball-airspeed" flying.

The instructor puts the plane into a screeching spiral and he gives you the controls

Some of the things which I had with only the needle, ball and airspeed to guide me were steep turns, timed turns, a stall, a let-down and plain straight-level flying, which is a task in itself. The crowning achievements of the partial panel instrument flying were recovery from unusual positions. The instructor puts the plane into a screeching spiral or a steep climbing turn; and, he gives you the controls in the midst of it. All you do, is try to center the needle and ball, retard the throttles if it is a dive and level the plane off by watching the altimeter and keeping it constant.

This morning, we were up at 4:45 + on the flight line at 6:00. There was not an instructor in sight. So, here's what happened! It was

a nice, warm Sunday morning like you'd expect in May in Boston; so, they gave us all airplanes from 7:30 'til 11:00. We were told to do anything we wanted: shoot landings, practice instruments or do stalls + single engine procedures. Jim Nolan + I divided the time in one plane. I had it for the first hour and ¾; so I decided to shoot landings, at Hornersville auxiliary field because the visibility was not too good. From 9:45 on, Jim did air work (instruments, etc.) while I "dozed off." We even ventured above the high clouds once, only to make an immediate let-down through them. This afternoon, I received my 10th + last hour of Link. (3/26/44)

Meanwhile, everybody still worries continually about getting through here. They have put several out in our class and you can never tell. They never used to put many out in Advanced schools; but, they do now. They always change things as we move along, it seems. (3/28/44)

You follow the lead plane as it appears only as a phantom silhouette

I have just returned from the flight line where I had my first two hours of night-formation. It was really fun! The night was so clear that you could see Memphis from 400' over the field. That's 60 miles! Of course, tonight's ride was dual, and we had a 3 ship element, alternating from a "v" to an echelon. The smooth night air makes the spacing and coordination more of a pleasure than day flying. The only thing is that you must keep moving your eyes from front to rear on the lead ship, thence to the ground and around the sky; because, you can't keep your eyes fixed at night or you get "vertigo" and then become unable to tell which end is up. Much of the time, you follow the lead plane as it appears only as a phantom silhouette against the backdrop of a sky reflection. It is really fun except that it leaves your eyes slightly strained, for it. It is funny to see fellows join the formation only to peel off later, after finding themselves mixed up with the wrong group of planes. (3/29/44)

Turbulent air was pitching us around like a match stick on the high seas

I rode for 1 ½ hours with Lt. Lancaster on instruments yesterday. It was only my second radio ride but he called it my "radio check," after I was finished. I never sweated so hard in all my life, trying to hold my altitudes and airspeeds. A 35 mile, rough + gusty wind at about 4000 feet made it simply a merry-go-round trying to hold the needles properly. You see, gusty, turbulent air was pitching us around like a match stick on the high seas. By the grace of a "long handled spoon," I managed to sweep across the cone, once more. (3/31/44)

Neilson wrote four pages of detailed account on the intricate procedures of this ride, which required instrument flying and radio navigation, and that on a very windy day. It was the acid test. The pilot orients the plane to four radio beams from the station which create an invisible grid divided into four quadrants. The pilot identifies the beam and makes corrections in direction of flight that allow him to get progressively closer to the beam, which renders an audible signal on the radio. Using this grid and some very difficult calculations, the pilot eventually locates the cone of silence, which is right over the station.

We flew up and down the light line between Blytheville and Memphis

After all this high class maneuvering, I came out near to the field, about ¼ mile, to be exact, + the problem was over. I called, "Blytheville Radio, this is Army 1-2-3-4 at 1850.' I have not broken through the overcast." That was simply a procedure call for training purposes on which we weren't going to land. With that, he took her in + landed + said that I was finished instruments. Naturally, that was a relief, although I felt that I did not deserve to pass. He said, "You know your procedures when to turn, etc. + that's what counts." This morning, however, I had to ride an anti-climactic ride with another instructor, in order to get my time.

Last night, they rushed us over to the line to fly at 5:00 p.m. I was assigned to fly two hours as co-pilot + two hours of pilot in night formation. During my first ride, from 9:00 'til 11:00, we flew up + down the *light line between Blytheville + Memphis. The night was clear, so clear that you could see Memphis 70 miles away, from 4000' over Blytheville. In

addition, we had a quarter moon which made Old Man River look like a phantom snake working his way through the blackness of the terrain. We flew mostly up + down the river, alternating between lead + wing in a two ship, step down formation. The lead ship would turn his navigation lights off, because lights are most deceiving + glaring for the eyes. On top of that, it was almost like a mystery story, following a phantom looking silhouette of an airplane. What a wonderful experience!

My eyes were about ready to pop

So, I got another big experience, flying over a big city at night. Talk about the light on Lawrence Rd at Xmas time! Ma, you haven't seen anything 'til you see a big city from the air, at night. As great as it was + as awe-inspiring as night formation is, it is the most nervous strain that flying offers, so, my eyes were about ready to pop, when I dropped her onto a flood-lighted portion of the east field (grass), at 1:45 a.m. You have to fly instruments and guard against "Vertigo" + at the same time snuggle up to a lead ship!

I returned to bed at 2:30 a.m., only to get up at 4:45 + return to the instrument group. Anyhow, I got a pleasant, rejoiceful hour + I finished my instrument course. Thank the Lord!

Yes, instruments is a major step; but, I'm not "in" yet. They are still "washing" boys out on the slightest provocations. So, it will continue to be a mental worry from here in. Now, naturally, they say they can put you out for minor infractions + a bad check ride in the transition group. Anyhow, I'm progressing + I have pretty good hopes of doing it now. (3/31/44)

*A light line consisted of elevated rotating beacons placed at ten-mile intervals on the ground to define air routes. The system was originally developed for the US Postal Service's air mail routes in the 1920s and later used by commercial airlines.[14]

Hundreds of soldiers walking aimlessly up and down the main street

It was a welcomed relief, to get off the field after 3 weeks without any time to ourselves. Going into town is always the same story: hundreds

of soldiers walking aimlessly up and down the main street in search of something, which there is nothing, to do. Before I returned to the field at 7:00, I went into the clothing place where a large number of the boys are going to have their clothes taken care of. (4/2/44)

Here's the program! When I clean up my last two hours of day-formation, I will have completed all the phases of the training except navigational (day, night + instrument). However, there will be a lot more to be heard from instrument training, should I go to a multi-engine transition school. If things go normally, my time will be divided as follows from now on.

1. 2 hrs. formation
2. Night cross-country
3. Time-distance cross-country
4. Day-night x-country, grand finale!

Before I went out last night, I went to confession at the chapel. While I was saying my prayers the chaplain came over and said, "You sound like a Boston Mick." Come to find out, he lives right near the Jenney station on the parkway, near the Lake. His name is Hogan and he's a real hustler and has gotten a lot done around the chapel, I guess. (4/2/44)

The inky-black wastes of Arkansas

Last night I had my first navigation trip. We went on the 350 mile triangle to Little Rock, Brinkley + return. The first + last legs were across some of the inky-black wastes of Arkansas, while the middle leg was a 60 mile jaunt along the main light-line between Little Rock and Brinkley. Yes, night cross-country flying is another new experience. It is new + far different from day pilotage. What check-points you have are clear + concise, because they are lighted towns which stick out like a sore thumb if you come near them. However, if you don't come near any towns, you have no way of determining your position. The only things that are visible from the air at night are towns, occasional railroad tracks and the navigational light lines. The cardinal rule for night navigation is "Hold your pre-determined heading." Now, this morning, I can see why that is necessary!

The reason that these night cross countries are not longer is that the A.T.-9 has a safe cruising time of only 4 hours and they don't care to have these vehicles landing at strange fields, at night. Most fields don't have the equipment to pick up the pieces! That is why all day-night cross countries are made so that the strange field landing is made in the daytime. For example, two boys had a landing gear fold on them when they landed at Independence, Kansas, two days ago. Well, the lecture is over, it is nearly 10:15, and we are returning to get ready for P.T.; so, I'll close with love, as always, from George. (4/5/44a)

Pendell "dumped" the wheels and flaps and dove straight down

Today, my flying consisted of my last two hours of formation flying. Pendell, our instructor, was flying in the lead ship for a good part of the time. One time, he dropped the wheels + full flaps and began slow-flying, out of a clear sky. Fortunately, both of us, on the wings, were alert enough and we dropped our wheels and flaps before we might have caught or passed the lead ship. Then, Pendell "dumped" the wheels and flaps and dove straight down, with a similar amount of surprise. This time, he did catch us unawares, and we were unable to catch him for a minute. It was just a little playing on his part. Yet, the lead ship takes his chances when he permits such actions, for if the wing ships don't immediately catch on, then he's the one who will get it in the neck.

Murphy and Morgan took their instrument team ride today + went over towards Dyersburg, Tennessee where they started playing with the 4 engine babies, flying forts. They had no trouble turning inside of the B-17s; but, when those big crates started diving on them, they got a little frightened + got out of the way. (4/5/44b)

If I ride tonight, I will have collected about 7 hours of pilot time and 1 hour of co-pilot time, today. You see, it never rains but it pours.

The only thing that I did anywhere nearly good, today, was my instrument take-off which was very good. I didn't let my directional gyro waver an inch and I held my airspeed fairly well; so, I got up out of traffic fairly decently. I now have 4 hours + 30 minutes of dual instrument time.

In the afternoon, I got an hour + 45 minutes of dual formation with Lt. Pendell. We flew all over Missouri, on this expedition. This is a nerve-wracking game in any plane, and the A.T.-9 is not different. We were in a 3-ship formation and we kept changing from a "V" to a step-down echelon. Then, we practiced "peeling off" of the formation + into the traffic pattern for a landing. (4/6/44)

The importance of formation flying went far beyond impressive air shows. It was a vital safety procedure, as enemy fighters would go after the bombers that strayed from the formations where they were easy prey for the bandits.

A dual ship came in for a landing and careened off the runway

I topped the afternoon's proceedings off by riding as co-pilot for Jim Nolan while he flew for an hour in formation. Pendell was in the lead ship of this formation with Neal. There is an instructor in every formation, just like at Basic; so, there can be no "fooling around."

An incident happened today that made an instructor's face pretty red, I'll bet. A dual ship came in for a landing + careened off the runway, across the muddy field directly in front of the tower, where a wheel promptly folded up + the ship went on its side. It turns out that an instructor was demonstrating a "simulated" single engine landing; but, he had cut the mixture control instead of the throttle + the engine was really dead. So, when he needed his left engine to help on his landing run, he didn't have it + his plane ground-looped. Students are expected to do such bone-head things; but an instructor – well, that's naughty! Naughty! A boy who flies an A.T.-10 had a new version of watching the A.T.-9 land. He says it looks like a kangaroo hopping down the runway, most of the time. (4/6/44)

The last week at Blytheville was extremely intense for class 44D. Not only did they need almost twenty more hours of flying time to complete the required seventy, but they were also required to pass tests, purchase the full complement of officer uniforms and paraphernalia, complete paperwork, make travel plans for a ten-day leave, and turn in equipment. George made a strong

point in his letters that at no time was his graduation certain. There were cadets in his class that washed out in the final days of AT, one of whom was a friend of Neilson's all the way since enlistment.

Another trip wire during the final days at Blytheville was the selection of flight officers (those who did not make lieutenant). A plane accident and around-the-clock flying contributed further to the strain. According to George, this tension existed by design to keep the men on edge. But he was the type of fellow who rose to a challenge rather than buckle under it. By his own admission, he was happiest when he was being pushed to the outer limits of his capacity. Though there was only a week left in Advanced, to George the battle was only half-won. Well did he comprehend the obstacles that stood between him and commissioning. As fired up as he was, there was no indication that the young man grasped that he would soon be going to war, or that this goal of becoming an officer and a pilot was to prepare him to go and get shot at. One hurdle was crossed the evening before he wrote a letter dated "Good Friday a.m."

Fortunately, my name was not on the list

Another thing is for certain, now! Last night they read off the list of men who will become Flight Officers in 44D. There were 29 "F.O.'s" on the list. Fortunately, my name was not on the list, nor was anybody else's with whom I have been closely associated at Primary, Basic + here. However, I have known about 8 boys who were on the list, who have been with me since Nashville. You probably understand the provisions of this Flight Officer deal. The entire thing...sums up to a threat or the proverbial "overhanging axe," which says that if you don't do this + that exactly right, from post to post, you'll become a flight officer + not a second lieutenant. They simply have you where they want you. Every time you miss P.T. or fall out late for a formation, or get a lot of "gigs," you begin thinking of being an "F.O." At any rate, the flight officers wear the same wings and get the same pay; for, the only difference is that they wear a blue + gold bar instead of a gold bar. Selections for Flight Officers

are definitely not made on the basis of flying ability, strange as it may seem. Anyways, as far as I am concerned, it simply means that if I do graduate, I will be a second lieutenant. Whether or not you graduate is not determined until the very last moment!

We almost ran into an airliner going in the opposite direction

Yesterday afternoon, I went on one of the so-called "Round Robin cross countries." It was the course between *BAAF, Advance, Jack's Creek, + BAAF. It was a 325 mile jaunt. Russell Morgan was the pilot + he was supposed to fly instruments, in order to get solo instrument time, while I logged navigation time. We both got in some good practice and we hit our E.T.A.s and check points right on the nose. However, we found that Lt. Pendell must have given us the wrong altitude for flying the airway between Jack's Creek and Blytheville. We were at 3500' and we almost ran into an airliner going in the opposite direction. It was nothing close at all: the only thing is that nobody is supposed to be at the same altitude on an airway.

Night flying is always nerve-wracking + when you spend all night trying to read all the fluorescent dials on the instruments + make landings in an A.T.-9 at the same time, you are doing a day's work! If you don't believe me, you should take a look at the crowd sprawled all over this post theatre, sleeping, while they are supposed to be listening to a medical officer speak on first aid. Of course, I am writing a letter instead of listening; but I'm awake at least!

It was shooting oil all over the place

The airplane that we had while I was pilot was a beaut! It was shooting oil all over the place to the extent that we could barely see out through the windshield. Then, on top of that the right engine only developed 1900 r.p.m. on takeoff instead of 2300. Each time, I asked Earl if he thought she'd take us off again. We watched it closely, and we kept dreaming of a fatal "single engine on take-off," every time we took off. That made the fun a little more exciting. Some of the ships are in sad shape + you have

to watch the gauges carefully. However, we called the main field for gas. So, Earl had a different ship on his mission.

None of my landings were any too good in the rather rough-for-night conditions. We made our black-out landings; I could have sworn that they lowered the runway on us. Wow! I did drop them in! But, I walked away + that's what counts.

These planes have fancy retractable landing lights on them. When you turn them on, they drop out of the bottom of the wing + act like spot-lights. When they are off, they retract back into the underside of the wings. Just like the light in the ice-chest, it disappears.
(4/7/44b)
*Blytheville Army Air Field

I was amused by the comment about the ice chest. For decades after the old ice boxes were replaced by electric refrigerators, Dad referred to the appliance as the ice-chest. The pre-electric chest was cooled by a huge block of ice that had been harvested from the local lakes in winter and stored between layers of straw in a barn until delivered to doorsteps.

We finally landed while the fire truck, ambulance and crash truck stood by

Morgan and I were scheduled to shoot landings at Hornersville. The weather closed in again before I got in the pilot's seat, at that. Besides, we had a beaut of an airplane which seemed to be held together by bailing wire. Over at Hornersville, we discovered that the right engine's oil was reading 80 degrees Cent. That is far above normal. Evidently, the lubricating lines were plugged. So, we decided to head for home, and we had a tough job trying to get the tail wheel to engage at Hornersville. When we finally got into the air, the [illegible word] indicator showed that the left wheel did not come up. Then we had to come by the tower so that they could examine the undercarriage. Thus, we got a big thrill out of all the attention. Then we finally landed while the fire truck, ambulance and crash truck stood by and waited for us to pile up (I guess).

By this time, the weather had become bad so that we were unable to get into the air again. In the meantime several B-24's came in amidst the bad weather conditions and landed. One of them was "Butcher Boy" with 63 missions, 5 zeros and 2 ships painted on her side. What a wreck! They're using it for training purposes now. (4/8/44)

I'll fix it so there'll be no attempts to meet me at the station

Thanks, for the Easter card, Ma. Easter was not a very festive occasion in this neck of the woods because of rainy weather all day Saturday and most of today. However, nobody much cared, for everyone's thoughts have turned towards the long awaited and even longer hoped for trip home. Although it is still a week, and a long week at that, before we are scheduled to graduate, it is natural to let your thoughts wander a bit. But, as I have repeatedly stated, you can't count the chickens till they have hatched, grown up, been killed, and fried on the pan.

Here's the latest set-up. We are supposed to graduate on Saturday afternoon, and then clear the post on a 10 day leave, as soon as the orders arrive. In the meantime, I have 16 hours to get, yet, cross country and instrument team rides. So, between signing forms, turning in clothing, flying, etc., my hands will be pretty well tied this week. All I know is that when I get finished, I'll get home as soon as it is humanly possible. I'll fix it so there'll be no attempts to meet me at the station, etc. Just forget about that. Everyone will be happier if I can just walk in the house, unattended. That's all I care about!

"Hell, I couldn't even hold a heading when I graduated"

The only thing that has been dimming the scene, lately, is the fact that Art Nebel washed out! He missed out on instruments. He said that he wasn't doing too well, which is a normal reaction; but, all of a sudden he was getting check rides and then he found himself out. That makes you think it over, a little. You see, we have been together ever since Grove City, and we both had Lonstrup at Primary. He certainly can fly as well as I can. It is just a case of not getting the "breaks." There's always something to bother a fellow's nerves. His trouble was that he had a very impersonal instrument instructor, who could settle for nothing less than specifications; while I had

an instructor who realized that he too was a cadet once. He told me once, "Hell, I couldn't even hold a heading when I graduated." I met a fellow who is in 44E who was at Grove City, also. He has been eliminated on his "64" physical. Well, enough of the gloom! Unless I have an accident or something, I expect to be "in" on next Saturday (April 15) afternoon. (4/9/44)

Weather was not cooperating and so flying was delayed on Monday. George learned that those who had everything but hours would likely graduate, but would have to remain on post until the hours were completed.

The next letter illustrates what was perhaps George's greatest challenge, and one that vexed him not only during his time in the AAF but in some ways throughout his life.

I always have something preying on my mind

It seems that a great percentage of the class is about ready to finish, while some of us have 25 + 30 hours to get. Instead of trying to have us all even, it seems as if they are going to let most of them finish and then have the bunch that is always at the tail-end in the alphabet, get theirs.

You see, this time element has been growing on me + bothering me no end. Not having missed a single flight line formation, there is no reason why I should not be up to schedule; yet, I am far behind. Why? Only because I am at the end of the list in our squadron + then because our instructor has to take what is left when they begin handing out the plane assignments. Frankly, I am so worked up that I'm not fit for anything. It is all because of the anxiety of getting near the end, etc. I suppose. There always seems to be something that bothers me, either needlessly or otherwise. I can see myself not getting any furlough or anything, at this point. Of course, I am not the only one, but still I can't conceive of getting finished by April 15. Ordinarily, when you pass on instruments, you're "in," but not me, oh no! I'll always have something to drive me to distraction. All the other fellows will be out on open post while a few of us will probably be flying in the rain + fog in order to finish up. They say that there's always a few who get that dose; so, I'll undoubtedly be one. There's always something to make this life miserable. Just think, I could have been

in Des Moines, Iowa, tonight, if only the plane which we had scheduled for the Little Rock cross country had not been cancelled out, on Friday night. It'll all probably get straightened out, soon; but I'm in a pessimistic mood now, so I had to let off a little steam. Some fellows seem to always breeze along, get their time normally + never have a thing bothering them. As for me, I always have something preying on my mind. So far, in Advanced, there has been no stumbling blocks except this matter of being "left at the post" in the matter of getting time; so, I suppose I should be thankful. (4/10/44a)

Today, there were torrential thunderstorms all day long and in between times we had high winds and low clouds. Consequently, we did nothing but hold down the chairs and tables in the ready room. (4/10/44b)

Well, I managed to collect 5 hrs. + 20 minutes of navigation + instrument time, by twice traveling between Advance, Missouri, Jack's Creek, Tennessee + Blytheville. I was with Murphy, the first time as pilot, flying instruments, and the second time as navigator. All in all, we flew 750 miles in about 4 ½ hours. We had a good chance to see the Mississippi River valley in all its strength as it appears in an ordinary spring. For, as we crossed + re-crossed the river, all you could see for 25 miles on either bank was flooded fields + villages. Those places that are flooded every spring, regardless of the river reaching flood stages. Even the environs of Blytheville, which lie completely in the delta region of the river, are almost completely soaked with water. Today, they had only one strip of ground that was not covered by water, on the so-called "East Field." When the planes finally landed, they would sink dangerously into the mud + almost stop quick enough to overturn. (4/11/44)

One wing was just about off

This morning is the "morning after," one of those days which I promised was coming, a day of reckoning when everybody had to fly like h--- to catch up on loose ends. 44D boys started flying the planes about 1:00 yesterday afternoon and I think that they were still in the air when the 44E boys got on the line at 5:30 this morning. It was really an

epic experience in my life. Night flying is really an experience, anyway; but, the traffic pattern which we had last night around 11:30 I'll long remember, I know. I'll bet everyone aged about 10 years, who was in the array of about 30 ships which had to keep circling the field. The reason that everybody had to circle the field was because there were two ships in the pattern which the tower was trying to land. One of the ships had hit a tree, making a long-low instrument take-off. He probably lost his bearings momentarily, and, he didn't pull her up out of Steele Field without the use of his airspeed altimeter or lights. Besides, come to find out, one wing was just about off + he didn't know whether his wheels went down or not. I heard the pilot actually crying over the radio, trying to keep the tower in touch with his position. It turned out that the pilot lost his wits so that the co-pilot had to land the airplane. The boys that saw the plane said that it was truly miraculous that they ever made it!

Meanwhile, the rest of us were circling the field at traffic attitude (11:30 p.m.). The other ship which was "in the spotlight" was mine. I had to go through the emergency wheel procedure when my nacelle pin disappeared at Cooter Field, where I had been shooting landings from 9:00 'til 11:00. Every time I tried to buzz the runway so that they could check my wheels, I would get cut off by some joker who had no regard for anyone's life + was making his own traffic pattern. We went around 15 times, 1 and ½ hours before we finally made a 115 m.p.h. no-flap landing in front of the runway control car. What an incident! I'll tell you more about it later.

I made a beautiful "moonlight landing"

Let me summarize yesterday's festivities. I got 10 hours of pilot time – 4 ½ instruments + 5 ½ of night flying. In the afternoon, I flew on instruments on a 400 mile cross country ride to Paragould, over the Ozarks to Black River, back to Advance, Mo., to Hickman, Tennessee + return. Anyhow, everything was peaceful + serene as I steamed over the field at 3:00 a.m., having completed, probably all of my night flying. So, we called the tower + let down + made our own traffic pattern + I made a beautiful "moonlight landing."

Yesterday, they issued us our "B-4" traveling bags, officer's flying coveralls, gloves, boots + a few miscellaneous articles. Right now, I'm

over my head in preparations to turn in clothes, etc. Just read a lecture on travel, leaves, baggage, etc. Good chance of going to Lockbourne, Ohio (B-24). In a hurry to fly again. (4/13/44)

Naturally, I am running around here like a chicken with his head half cut off, at this juncture! Last night, we finished flying. With that, I completed 72 hours of pilot time and about 24 hours of co-pilot time, here, at Advanced. So, my grand total of time is up to about 235 hours, in addition to co-pilot time.

So, I am a nervously tired and worked up boy, today, as I have been making the rounds of turning in flying clothes, turning in G.I. clothing, clearing the dental clinic, acquiring my clothes, foot locker, etc. from the tailor, etc. I am writing this letter from the flight line where we are all bedecked in our new officer's coveralls. We are here to turn in our instrument manuals, + maps, and also to pay for the "stars" that I accumulated here. We had a "dry run" on the graduation exercises this morning in addition to all the aforementioned things.

I expect to leave at midnight on Saturday for home (sweet home)

Just before we came to the flight line, they read off the list of assignments. I am going to Tyndall Field, Florida. I don't know what I am going to fly, yet, because, they have several types of ships at that field. I know none of the details because I will not get my orders until I graduate, in the afternoon at 2:30 p.m. Here's the "dope:" in brief because I'm too excited to write sensibly.

1. Party at officer's club this evening
2. Graduation at Post Recreation Hall, 2:30 p.m. Saturday
3. Finance office – 4:00 p.m.
    a. Receive $250.
    b. Receive orders
    c. Pay P.X. for clothes
4. Clear the post – after 5:00 p.m., sign out
    a. Sign out
5. I expect to leave at midnight on Saturday for home (sweet home).

6. Trip will be via St. Louis + New York. If things work out, I should be home some time on Monday, depending upon transportation from New York (plane if possible).
7. Everything that needs be said from now on can be best said at home.

Here's a breakdown of what happened to the class, as of tomorrow:

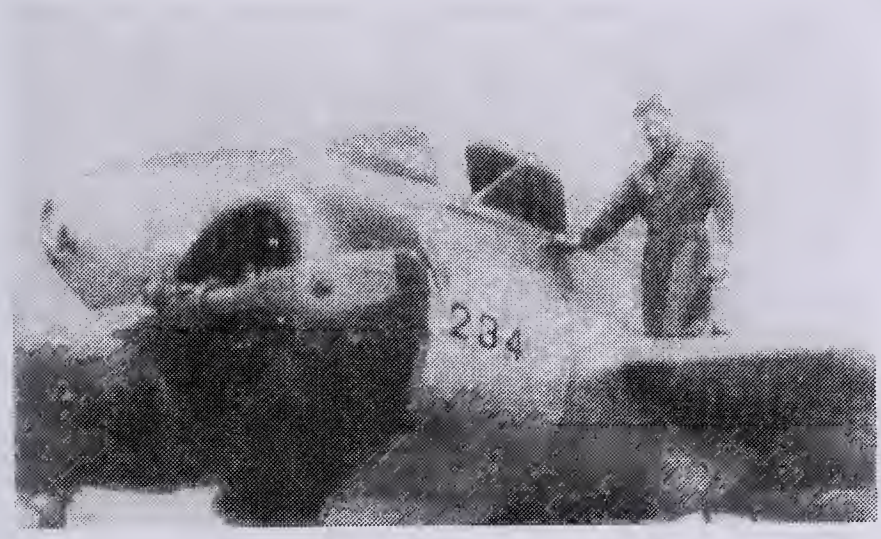
1. 100 boys – Lockbourne A.A.F., Ohio (B-17s)
2. 85 boys – Smyrna, Tenn. (B-24s)
3. 60 boys – Tyndall Field, Fla. (?)
4. 35 boys – Laredo, Texas (?)
5. 5 boys – Columbia, South Carolina (A-20s)
6. 1 boy – P-38 (Photo Reconnaissance)
7. 30 boys – unassigned – to return to Blytheville – some will be instructors.

Nolan, Nuber + Jack Moy + Jack Martin from Grove City will go to Lockbourne (Columbus, Ohio). Murphy + I are both going to Tyndall. Pop Nelson + Russ Morgan will both be instructors, here. Nebel leaves for Bombardier school Moody Field, Ga., tomorrow.

La de dah!#? (4/14/44)

The details of graduation were apparently delivered orally to Ma and Betty in Medford, as this is the last correspondence from Blytheville. He made it! Neilson received a commission as a second lieutenant and got his coveted pilot's wings. George survived the Battle of Arkansas, his own term for thirty-six weeks of flight training at Helena, Walnut Ridge, and Blytheville, Arkansas. He had proven to himself that he could do it. Finally, after fourteen months away, he was able to go home to see Ma and Betty before returning for several months of pre-deployment training. Absent a written record, one can only imagine the thrill George had in being reunited with his family, at least Ma and Betty, for his brothers were away on active duty.

AT-9, Advanced Flight trainer.

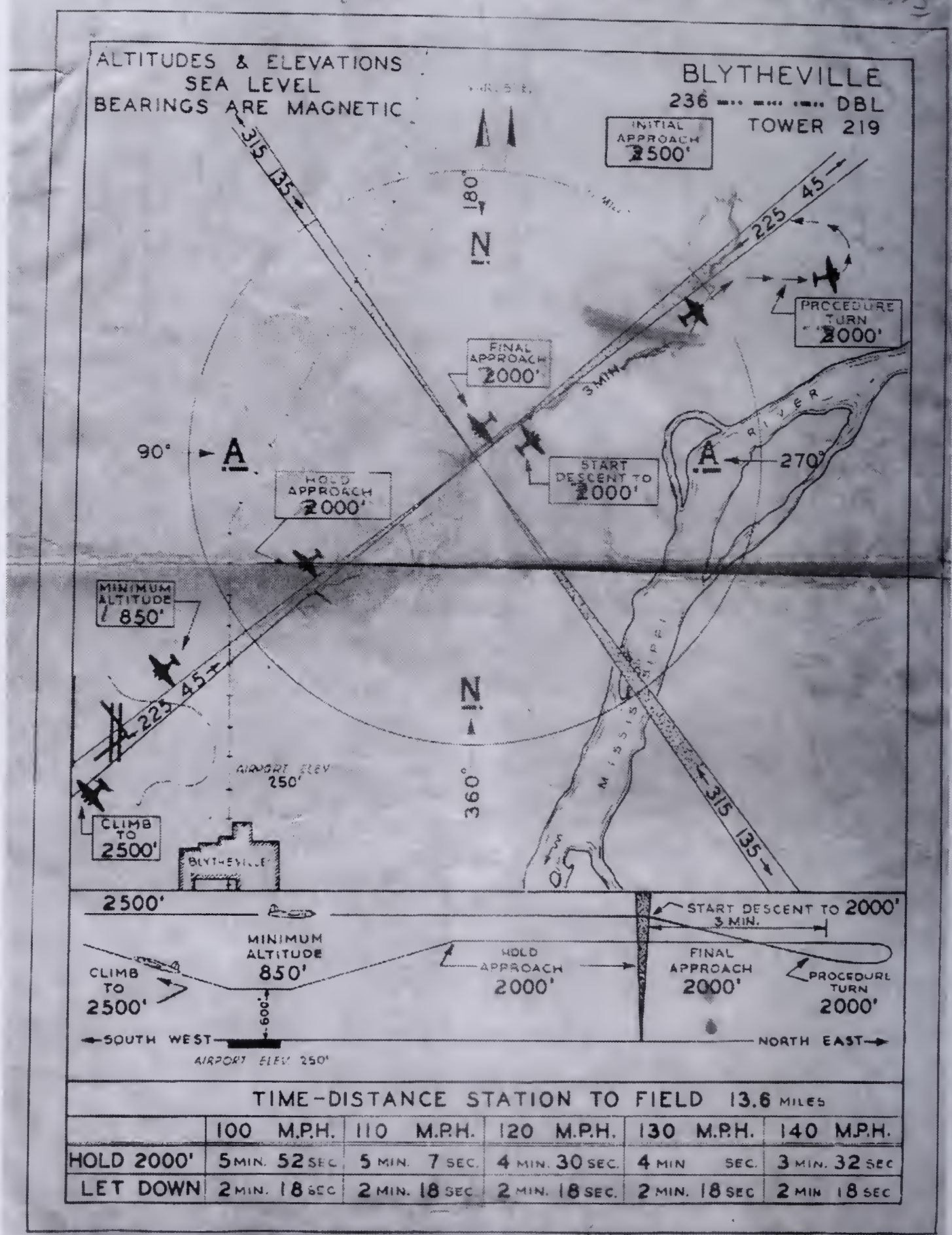


The AT-9 was a twin-engine plane that prepared pilots for two and four-engine ships.

GHN at Helena Aero Tech.

Cadet Neilson wearing student officer stripes at Blytheville AAF, spring 1944

(excerpt from Radio Facilities Charts)



Landing instructions for training flight showing radio navigation points, Advanced Flight Training, Blytheville AAF, Blytheville, Arkansas

Robert C. (Bob) Neilson with his new bride, Catherine (Kay) Sill Neilson

ARMY PILOTS who recently wo
wings at Blytheville, Ark., Arm
Air Field: Top left and right, 2n
Lts., Leander C. Lake, Medford
and George H. Neilson, West Med-
ford; bottom, left and right: 2d Lt
Robert J. Rowe, and Flight Office
Hilari H. Stundis, Dorchester.

Boston Traveler news clipping showing Lt. Neilson after his commissioning at Blytheville AAF. April 1944.

Boston Traveller, April 24, 1944, reprinted with permission of the Boston Herald

The only one in the class A uniform for this photo shot, Air Cadet Neilson is shown in Helena Aero Tech Class Book, Primories of 44 along with several of the men he trained with.

Chapter 11

Transition Flight Training

Tyndall Field
Panama City, Florida

The Run up to D-Day: Cutting the Jugular Vein

The spring of 1944 witnessed some of the greatest air battles of the war as the approaching D-Day invasion required that the Luftwaffe be effectively neutralized. Allied leaders Sir Arthur Tedder of Britain and Gen. Carl Spaatz of the United States had opposing views on whether oil targets or transportation sites should be the bombing priority. Nazi Germany was an industrial giant, and indiscriminate bombing of industrial areas was unlikely to stop its war-making capability. Instead, Allied leaders sought to find the jugular vein of the Reich, that element without which the armies would be paralyzed and industry crippled.

Most of the fuel used by the Wehrmacht and the Luftwaffe was high-grade gasoline made in the Reich's synthetic oil refineries. German scientists had developed a way to make gasoline from coal and water through the Bergius Hydrogenation process. By-products included explosive materials that were used in manufacturing weapons. Coal provided 95 percent of the Reich's energy for domestic and industrial purposes.[1] Most of the synthetic oil plants were in the southeastern part of the Reich in German Silesia, Czechoslovakia, and the Balkans. Rail transportation assets (marshaling yards, bridges, and rolling stock) were essential for moving fuel, heavy equipment, and ordnance as well as troops to the battle zones. Oil was the lifeblood of the Reich, but railroads were the veins and arteries that carried it and almost everything else for the war effort.

Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, supreme commander of Allied forces in Europe, decided that destroying the transportation nexus in France was most immediately relevant to enabling a successful amphibious assault on the Normandy coast, but oil plants remained a high secondary priority.[2] The marshaling yards surrounding Normandy were just over the English Channel and easily reached by the AAF based in East Anglia. Such targets were not as heavily defended as aircraft plants and oil refineries. But strategic bombing was still relatively inaccurate, and since the rail yards were adjacent to densely populated residential areas, much collateral killing of civilians resulted. The Allied air command worried that the destruction and death resulting from these air raids would sour relations with postwar France, yet the plan was executed, and the alliance survived. The success of D-Day and the rapid drive across France was largely due to the disabling of the transportation networks prior to June 6.[3]

After the rail offensive, the Eighth undertook a campaign to destroy the massive military-industrial oil works at Leuna, which, together with Politz, another fuel plant in Silesia, produced one-third of Germany's supply of synthetic oil. The sprawling Leuna complex near Merseberg produced gasoline for the Luftwaffe, lubricants for tanks, rubber for motorized divisions, and explosives for armor and artillery. Employing 35,000 workers, it processed millions of tons of local brown coal and billions of gallons of water. The plant included 250 buildings and hundreds of miles of underground cables, rail lines, and overhead pipes. Over ten months between May 1944 and April 1945, 6,630 American bombers tried to shut down the complex. Leuna became the most heavily defended industrial target in Europe. Over 1,200 US aircraft were consumed in the terrible battle for Leuna, which many airmen called "the most forbidding destination in the land of doom."[4]

The Fifteenth Air Force, based in Foggia, Italy, was to play a huge role in the bombing attacks on the synthetic oil plants and natural petroleum refineries in the southeastern part of the Reich at Blechhammer in German Silesia and Ploesti in Romania.

Prior to the advances in fighter range and the establishment of the Fifteenth AAF in November 1943, these enemy targets were unreachable. They had almost as many flak guns surrounding them as the city of Berlin, and bombing missions to the refineries exacted an enormous cost in planes and fliers. Despite the availability of hundreds of thousands of slave laborers from around Nazi-occupied Europe to repair the bombed plants, oil shortages began to be felt in the Reich, which resulted in rationing and grounding of planes. This, together with the attrition of pilots, put the Luftwaffe on the run by spring, 1944. The horror of war was felt not only by the Allies but by their adversaries as well:

> "This summer is...like a nightmare from which there is no awakening," Luftwaffe pilot Heinz Knoke wrote in his diary. On nearly every mission his brake squadron lost five pilots. For his air commanders to order "battered old crates" to meet thundering formations of American fighters was, he grimly concluded, "nothing less than murder!"[5]

The United States produced more oil than all the other countries in the world combined, and twenty times that of Germany even at the height of its wartime production.[6]

> With the fuel shortage "unbearable," in Adolf Galland's words, the German air force was caught in a fatal trap. Forced to defend the oil plants that supplied its fuel, it lacked the fuel to defend them adequately.[7]

Adolf Galland was Hitler's commander of the Luftwaffe's fighter arm for most of the war until he got canned for opposing the dictator on a stupid edict.

One of the less obvious but yet significant ways that aerial bombing affected the Reich was the shift in resources from an offensive to a defensive posture. As the war progressed, more and more German resources were poured into anti-aircraft guns, to

the detriment of offensive hardware production, including planes. By the end of the war, there were some 10,000 high-powered flak guns fired by 500,000 men and women in the Reich. Further, Hitler became distracted by the secret weapon project known as V-1 and V-2. Launched from bases in northwest France, these unmanned bombs (missiles) were aimed to strike terror onto English cities. They were not accurate enough to hit strategic targets, so they were only valuable as terror weapons with no tactical importance. They consumed inordinate amounts of cash that was needed for more important objectives. It was believed that Germany was also developing a V-3, which would carry an atomic warhead.[8] Albert Einstein, a Jewish German physicist who fled Nazism in 1933 and emigrated to the United States, warned the U.S. Government of Germany's atomic research. It was this information that eventually led to the Manhattan Project. Had Germany succeeded in its quest to produce a nuclear bomb before the collapse of the Reich, it could have been a game-changer.

15 Day Leave

Upon graduation [from Advanced Flight Training] everyone was given a 2-week leave before reporting to the first post-graduation duty station, as commissioned officers. So, I went home to 110 Sharon St., West Medford, where my mother and sister Betty were at our 3-family home. Betty was then teaching at [what] was then called Lowell State Teachers College, while mother, seriously diabetic at this stage, was spending her time worrying about brother Bill, now serving in Europe with the Transportation Corps and brother Bob who [*had been] in the "Yankee Division," on Guadalcanal, in the South Pacific*.

It was good to get home, after the scramble through all the bases and the flight-training, just to rejoice for a few days. However the situation was not conducive to enjoying things for more than a few days. The battles were raging in both Europe and the Pacific. All of my friends were away and somehow involved in the service. I quickly got the impression that I wanted to get going and do my

part, as it appeared that all the young men in town were doing. It is noteworthy that WW-II took a proportionally higher number of men from the community than any war before or since. It seemed like everyone was gone, primarily due to the draft. Thus my stay was rather sterile and uneventful. (G.H.N., 1991)[9]
*Bob had actually been evacuated from Guadalcanal the previous year (1943), but was still on active duty stateside.

In his letter home from Tyndall Field on May 3, George reflected on his recent time at home:

I realize that I acted like I had never been away

A word about my being home, now. Naturally, it was too short of a time for me to make things proper. I feel, as you do probably, that I could have spent more time at home, with you. That is my only regret, at this point. On the other hand, you were anxious, + rightly so, for me to see this one + that one, because you wanted them to see me, because I accomplished something. I suppose that made you happy to a certain extent. All in all, I feel like I was not successful in my attempt to impress you with any sincerity as to my feelings about you and home. I realize that I acted like I had never been away, had never appreciated home and maybe did not appreciate home. But, maybe it was because the bread, the steak, the pie and the cake and all was just the same as usual. Ma, that was + is what makes home so good. It is so good that we take it as matter of fact, and that is what makes it harder on you. As you always say, I can readily see now it will be missed someday. Ma, It wouldn't be right if I didn't hear you ask me if I had a handkerchief, when I was going out at night. (5/3/44)

TYNDALL FIELD, PANAMA CITY, FLORIDA

Returning from leave, I reported to Tyndall AFB for "Transition Flight Training" onto B-17 type aircraft. Transition meant to become familiar and learn to fly the plane. Panama City is on the panhandle of Florida, not far from the big naval flying base at Pensacola. It was now May and the weather was hot and pleasant

along the Gulf of Mexico. This was quite a switch from Arkansas, in addition to which life as an officer began to be a bit more pleasant. Once again, ground-school [included] familiarization with the B-17 airplane, this time. The time I spent at Tyndall Field would develop about 40 hours of flight training.

One of the activities at Tyndall Field was artillery training at a nearby army base, for which the planes at Tyndall towed targets for them to shoot at. So, during our orientation on the B-17's we towed long, canvas sleeve-type targets, on the end of a long wire, reeled out from the tail of the plane. The artillery fired at these targets: but, it was not considered dangerous work???

The 6 weeks at Tyndall was considered a stepping-stone, but not very eventful or memorable, save for the beginning practice with the B-17 "Flying Fortress" bomber. (G.H.N. 1991)[10]

From the beginning of May, George would see military life from the perspective of an officer. There is deliberate and unapologetic discrimination between officers, non-commissioned officers, and enlisted men. Officers are a privileged class in the military. After an initial excitement about the favorable status this provided George and his colleagues, Lt. Neilson was to become bothered by some of the apparent injustice of the system.

Hot, smoky, and sultry cars make breathing almost impossible

Well, I spent my first day as an officer today. I just don't know what to make of it, saluting + acting like a gentleman all the time. But first, I must tell you of my epic + tantalizing train ride which ended at 10:00 this morning. Ma, you could not stand it for one minute, I am certain. Hot, smoky, and sultry cars make breathing almost impossible. While you don't respect women for riding in such times, it is really shocking to see the young women + their children + what they go through. It almost makes you cry to see little babies crying + restless for lack of air to breathe in the smoke-filled coaches. The women begin to look like horrible wretches after about 10 hours on the train + it's a wonder that the babies survive.

Going from Savannah to Dothan, Alabama last night, it was blasting hot to begin with. Then, they were unable to turn off the heating system, so it was practically unbearable. Women ranging from 30 to 60 sprawl themselves all over the trains trying to sleep. Now, I'm telling you, it makes you think things over. When we arrived at Dotham at 5:00 this a.m., a group of us who had gathered, wandered through the streets until we awakened a storekeeper who made us some breakfast while we waited for our connection to Panama City.

Well, I finally saw the Gulf of Mexico + Panama City all at once when our train pulled into the town at 10:00 a.m. Almost wilted from fatigue + and 90o heat, we scrambled off the train + onto a van type bus that was waiting to pick up about 30 of us who had gathered. Some of the boys coming here have already had 2 months on the B-17 at Lockbourne A.A.F., at Columbus. We did not get much of a look at the supposedly filthy town here; but Tyndall Field lies 18 miles from the town + it is completely surrounded by water on two sides + partially on 2 more. You see, it is necessary to cross a bridge in order to get to the premises.

Here's the story. There are 140 of us here for a 5 week or so course on the B-17 (Flying Fortress). We will get, mostly, a thorough ground course in the particulars of the B-17, while we will get 30 hours of co-pilot time, during the 4 or 5 weeks that we should be here. From here, the boys can expect to go to an overseas replacement center. Yet, as I told you, nothing is for certain.

Primarily, this field is a flexible gunnery school where they have hundreds of boys in training to become aerial gunners, while hundreds of others are bombardier cadets who take aerial gunnery as a part of their training. So, you see, the 140 2nd Lts. + flight officers are only a small class + group of the field's population. The boys with whom we will ride as co-pilots have already had over 100 hours in the Flying Fortress; because, they had transition training at Lockbourne in Columbus.

After a few "yes sirs," my foot locker from Blytheville was in my room

Anyhow, I spent the day signing in at the personnel section, the adjutant's office, the financial office, the very fine atmosphere of the

officer's club, etc. In order to get my trunk up from the quartermaster corps, all I had to do was to ask some sergeant who was driving a truck. Then, after a few "yes sirs," my foot locker from Blytheville was in my room. I lost little time getting into my suntans when I arrived here because the sweltering heat makes it almost impossible to live, anyhow.

They have, right here on the post, a special beach for officers to use so it looks like I might be able to heed your desires and get some salt water in my veins. Tyndall is a brighter, more permanent post than any place I have been with the exception of Maxwell Field. I guess that it will be a case of spending most of the time on the post, because the field is actually so far from civilization.

Here, they have a great assortment of airplanes: B-26s, A.T.-6, P-47, P-40, B-17s, *B-34s. They have about 15 different varieties of planes on the field. It took me a long time to get over being homesick, yesterday, because I was thinking of all the tender steaks, the pies, the homemade bread, etc. that I was having at home.

Junior was good to me in Washington, and, he bought me a good meal + shipped me around the town in taxis. He sure looked rested + in good health to me. He says that he has not been working hard. (4/27/44)
*Lockheed Ventura two-engine bomber

During an orientation lecture by the director of training for the field, the colonel urged the men not to become impatient because they were assigned for copilot training. He explained that the school was fairly new and intended to give the men more understanding of the operations of the planes, including what to do when they become crippled in a raid. This was to be a complete engineering course on the B-17, George explained. It was not certain that the members of George's unit would be assigned to B-17's, as some were sent to fly B-24's.

The B-17 Flying Fortress

Believed by many to be the plane that won the war, the Boeing B-17 long-range heavy bomber was the most advanced aircraft of its time, until the advent of the B-29 Superfortress. There were

ten different models of the B-17 as the plane was improved prior to, during, and after World War II.

Originally named the Boeing 299, it was designed after the model 24 civilian airliner. The plane was first built in July 1935 as a long-range bomber. It featured an all-metal monoplane wing and was originally called Boeing's Battle Cruiser. A newsman covering the rollout ceremony called it the "Flying Fortress," and the name stuck. It was designed to be a self-defending aircraft that could operate beyond the range of fighter escorts. Its maiden flight was on July 28, 1935. On October 20 of the same year, the plane made a logged flight from Seattle to Wright Field (near Dayton, Ohio) where it was to attend an official bomber competition. It averaged 235 mph on this cross-continental flight, and the aircraft was controlled mostly by autopilot.

The B-299 outperformed its competitors, but its ascent to fame was not simple. The plane crashed due to pilot error during the competition on October 30, killing the test pilot and crew. Nonetheless, the army ordered thirteen units of the redesigned plane, named the YB-17 with Four Wright-Cyclone 850-horsepower engines.

Despite many early problems, interest in the "Seventeen" by the military was generated by the storm clouds gathering over Europe and the Far East. In 1938, it became the first plane equipped with a supercharger for high-altitude flying. A supercharger forced air into the carburetor to compensate for the thinner air at high altitudes. This device raised the operating ceiling from 239 mph at 5,000 feet to 271 mph at 25,000 feet.

Over the years of its storied life, several innovations were added. Of note were the Norden bombsight and the Sperry turret. Designed by Carl Norden, the Norden bombsight was operated by the bombardier in the nose section of the plane. The bombardier would sight the target in the Norden. Once it was in range, the plane was flown on autopilot until the release of the bombs.

The Sperry turret was a rotating capsule-like Plexiglas chamber that was lowered from the fuselage to a position below the belly of the plane, where the turret gunner could see 360

degrees and aim his machine gun in almost any direction. It was very cramped, and only very small men could man it.

The B-17G, which Lt. Neilson first flew, was built on the following specifications:

Wing Span:	103 ft., 9 3/8 in.
Length:	74 ft. 3.9 in. (Cheyenne Tail)
Height:	19 ft. 2.33 in.
Power plant:	4 Wright R-1820-97 Cyclone with 1000 hp @ 2300 rpm @ 2000 ft.
Empty Weight:	36,134 lbs.
Gross Weight:	40,260 lbs.
Cruising Speed:	160 m.p.h.
Top Speed:	302 m.p.h.
Ceiling:	36,400 ft.
Range:	3750 miles
Crew:	10
Bomb Load:	6 x 1600 lbs. and 2 x 4000 lbs.
Armament:	11 x .50 caliber machine guns (up to 13 x .50 cal.)
Crew Positions:	Pilot, co-pilot, navigator, radio operator, bombardier, engineer/top-turret gunner, waist gunners (2), ball-turret gunner, tail gunner.
Features:	Plexiglas nose cone with 3 machine gun sockets, top gun blister or top turret, belly ball-turret (Sperry), wing bomb racks, cheek bulges, radio compartment, chin turret, radar dome, Plexiglas tail turret.

During World War II, the "Flying Fortress," "Fortress," or simply "Fort," as the plane was commonly called, was used by the USAAF, the RAF's Bomber Command, and even by the German Luftwaffe, which used captured 17s for noncombatant purposes. It was used in three wars after WWII in the 1950s and '60s: Korea, Israel, and Vietnam. The standard olive-drab camouflage paint was discarded for polished steel in mid-1943.[11]

The B-17 and its successor, the B-24 "Liberator," were the workhorses of the USAAF's strategic bombing campaign in Europe from 1942 until the end of the war in 1945. There was a total of 290,000 B-17 sorties (combat flights) in the ETO. A total

of 12,677 of the aircraft were produced during the war, a credit to America's astronomical industrial might, a major factor in the Allied victory over the Axis.[12]

The plane was seething with powerful armaments designed to keep the Luftwaffe fighters at bay and shoot them out of the sky. It was a formidable killing machine that, in numbers in excess of one thousand planes at a time, darkened the skies over Nazi-occupied Europe and ultimately reduced German industry to ruins. This was the aircraft that Lt. George Neilson would fly in twenty-eight combat missions with the Fifteenth AAF out of Foggia, Italy, during his overseas deployment from October 1944 to September 1945.

Three of us decided to wait for a bus like the rest

Well life continues in this much lighter vein, with all the freedom + comforts of a human being at least. I am enjoying this still novelty life very much except that my right arm has not yet had sufficient practice to become hardened to the rigorous routine of saluting. This post is as 'eager' a one that I've seen as far as saluting is concerned. There are hundreds of cadets + aerial gunners who will go around corners to salute and look longingly at you. Most of the kids here will never get to be officers and they look at our bunch as if we were gods.

There are numerous things which I can't get used to at this moment. One of them is at the P.X. where they have a section reserved for officers to buy milk shakes + sandwiches. Meanwhile, hundreds, it seems, of other boys are trying to swarm around the remainder of the fountain. The way it works, usually, is that an officer can walk up + get waited on immediately, while the others have to wait for a long time. When you do that, the boys look at you + many of them feel subdued, inferior, etc. I cannot get used to that now, any more than I could as a cadet. This evening, I sized up such a situation + walked out because I would have felt ill at ease there. However, I expect that time will change that situation. Last night, when we left for town there were mobs of boys waiting for a bus at the gate. All I would have had to do is have an M.P. get me a ride; but, 3 of us decided to wait for a bus like the rest.

There are just a few more (hundred) things than on the A.T.-9

Yesterday morning, we began our course with a 3-hour lecture on the general features of the B-17F airplane. After one of the boys from Lockbourne showed us where things were, we spent 2 or 3 hours getting "cockpit time" on the B-17. There are just a few more (hundred) things than on the A.T.-9. However, the pilot's compartment has a compactness and atmosphere which bears a striking resemblance to the A.T.-9. A few of the new items which will be on the control pedestal are super-chargers, carburetor air filters, automatic pilot, prop-feathering devices, emergency engine fire extinguishers, de-icing equipment and 4 separate radios. A Boeing Fortress uses 52 gallons of gas per hour per engine or 208 gallons per hour.

The B-26 "Martin Marauder" is the world's hottest + most efficient twin-engine airplane. It cruises at over 200 m.p.h. and it lands at 140 m.p.h., far more than any other plane. It used to be called the "flying coffin" because fellows had such a trouble in landing + taking off. A pilot who flew them in combat said that they lost more B-26s on take-offs + landings in Britain than they did over Germany.

We learned to use another device today which is as complicated as a slide-rule. It is called the "load adjuster." It is a $130. device which looks and acts like a slide rule. However, it is designed for the particular needs of the B-17. When loading a B-17 with men, fuel, guns, apparatus, bombs, etc., they start with an empty ship + make a move on the adjuster, each time weight is added to the plane. When the plane is all loaded, the adjuster will indicate the center of gravity of the plane + if it is safe for flight, etc. It is almost another magical device which this war has provoked. (4/29/44)

You drive it like a Mack truck

I had my first ride in Boeing's type "B-17," model "F" airplane, better known to you as the flying fortress this afternoon. It was made of a demonstration ride, I guess. The fellow who was first pilot was a fellow with 100 hours in the 17, so, he was pretty "hot."

Anyhow, I was at the controls of the big, clumsy apparatus for a full 30 minutes of our 2 hour ride. Part of the time, there was nobody even in the right seat. You see, the right seat will be my position while here; but, the boy let us each take a crack at the pilot seat today. Well, to tell the truth, it is like driving a big Greyhound bus, no more, no less. There's absolutely no thrill to it like the A.T.-9, and it seems to land like a sponge on a mattress. It actually lands slower than the A.T.-9 (about 100 m.p.h.). You drive it like a Mack truck, and you make your control settings and lock them into position, so that you can keep both hands on the wheel. The beauty of this plane is that you can trim it up to fly hands-off. The trim tabs are very sensitive and you actually can save yourself a workout by using them.

The pilot in charge demonstrated the procedure for feathering the propeller on a dead engine for the 2 of us students who were aboard. The blade actually turns so that it offers no resistance whatsoever and the prop does not rotate although the plane is in full flight. Since there is very little horizon down here, most of the flying is done with reference to instruments, although they are only used as a check, in the daytime. We made 3 landings in the course of the time; and, I got a good look at the bay, the swamps and Tyndall Field. I believe I'll like the smooth-like flying of this plane; but, I wish I could get into something like a B-26 with a little pep (like the A.T.-9). (5/2/44)

We had a lecture on "ditching" in the ocean

They did not have us scheduled to fly; so, most of us spent this morning cruising around the flight line examining the P-40s, the B-26s, and the rest of the others. Theoretically, we were supposed to be familiarizing ourselves with that big, lumbering crate called the B-17.

I forgot to mention, that I got an hour in the Link Trainer this morning. We will only get occasional time in the link from now on; but, we were warned always to use it to the best advantage for practicing instrument flying.

This afternoon, we had another hour lecture on the technicalities of the B-17. We had a lecture on "ditching" in the ocean, and in connection with that, a view of what the equipment on such a raft includes.

About the airplane, you might be interested to know that when a B-17 is equipped to carry a maximum load of gasoline, it has 24 tanks. Most of these tanks are small, removable ones and they cannot be carried along with a full bomb load. Today, they gave us an insight into the methods of transferring gasoline from one tank to another in order to balance the plane. They have all sorts of fuel transfer valves and motor-driven pumps to accomplish that.

A thing that I am going to like about this new "deal" is it is not always necessary to follow the crowd. For instance, we are not eating at the officer's mess simply because facilities there are inadequate. Now, since food at the cadet mess is of the "field ration" variety, I believe that it will be nice to pay a little more and eat at the officer's mess once in a while.

About the living conditions, we are living in rooms which hold 8 or 10 boys, just like at Maxwell Field. You see, a school for officers is new to this field, thus their *B.O.Q. is not adequate to have us. Therefore, we live in the cadet fashion at $40. per month. Of course, we have the rooms cleaned + our beds made; but, it is not as nice as it could be. No kicking, mind you, just an explanation. (5/3/44)

*Bachelor Officer Quarters

She seems to sag right down onto the runway like a big bag of sand

Yes, 4 of us went up in the B-17 last night for a total of 4 ½ hours. In these familiarization rides, they take 4 fellows up and keep changing seats. There was also a crew chief and a radio operator on the plane last night. It was a beautiful moon-lit night which made it very nice out over the water. Most of the time, we were just making take-offs and landings, in order that we could get familiar with all the procedures. As yet, they haven't let the co-pilots make any landings; but, it seems like the 17 should be easier to land than any plane we have flown in. When leveled off at the proper altitude, she seems to sag right down onto the runway like a big bag of sand. The only thing you notice is a loud screech from the wheels when they first hit the concrete.

Part of the time, we were up just flying around in circles. The pilot let us each take turns in making steep turns and banks. We were doing

70o banks on instruments. That's something I'd never try at night in an A.T.-9 or BT. You wouldn't think that they would make such steep turns in a big crate like the B-17. Yet, we were making steep turns at about 3000.' When you make turns in that baby, you have to use both hands and twist the wheel with plenty of might. You actually sweat plenty turning that plane, believe me! To show you how much rudder pressure is necessary to hold the plane, the pilot cut two engines on the same side and made us hold a constant heading. You actually need both feet on the same rudder pedal.

Well, that's about all the news, except that I did get to lay on the beach for an hour yesterday and picked up quite a bit of sun. (5/5/44)

Tyndall Field was the least stressful part of the young Neilson's twenty month AAF training. The daily schedule was not especially demanding and George did not have to get up early unless he had ground school or flying scheduled. He enjoyed the perks of being an officer such as inexpensive meals at the Officers Club, freedom from inspections and details, and beach time. PT was optional. He did not work under a specific instructor and was not having regular check rides. George openly acknowledged to Ma and Betty that his was a pretty good life at the moment. But, it was a "moment" that was to be cut short. The rumor about being transferred to Tampa materialized at the end of May and Neilson was on the way to another station on the endless AAF G.I. Express.

A group of P-40s kept diving at us and swerving by us

I flew on my first gunnery mission yesterday morning. It lasted for 5 hours. That, of course, was the longest I have ever stayed up at any one time. We were supposed to fly at 8,000' over a designated spot on the shore-line, to pick up another plane at 8:00. We flew in formation from 8:00 'til 9:30 with this plane, while a group of P-40s kept diving at us and swerving by us. They were simulating enemy fighter planes, attacking a bomber formation. The object was for the [B-17] gunners to shoot at the pursuit planes. However, when they practice this work, they have a camera

attached to the machine guns; so when the gunner pulls the trigger, he merely takes a picture of the fighter plane. His score is based on how much of the plane comes into his sights. Meanwhile, the boys in the P-40s have a great time doing acrobatics all around us. At about 9:45, we joined a formation of 6 B-17s; and, there were about 5 pursuit planes attacking all the time. During the course of events, I did some of the flying. I tried my hand at the formation, for about ¾ hour; but, it's hard work pushing that crate around and I need lots of practice, in short practice sessions, before I can do it well. However, bomber flying overseas is practically formation work, first, last, and always; thus, it is a good time to start learning how. I made the let-down from 8,000 feet when the mission was completed, too. (5/7/44)

Formation flying was essential when fighter aircraft were present. German fighters tended to go after the *viermots* (four-engine airplanes) when they lagged behind the formations. Often they would try to force a plane out to the perimeter of the formation and then attack it with more than one fighter.

What a green at-the-gills looking crew

About the gunners, I noticed how rigid + straight + scared they stood while the pilot was giving them their pre-flight directions on where to go in case the alarm bell sounded or what to do in case we had to ditch the plane in the ocean. Not realizing that it was their first ride, I wondered how + why they acted so scared as he was talking to them. They were practically standing in a brace! But, you can imagine how you'd feel if on your first ride, all they told you was what to do "in case." Naturally, they had an experienced gunnery instructor with them, though. Anyway, I didn't think a thing about it until when we were coming home, the crew chief reported that 4 of them where laid-out, sicker than dogs! We had been practicing steep turns, too! In the back end of a B-17, you get the feeling of being in a whirring bottle, or on the end of a see-saw. I'll bet that they didn't take many pictures.

Imagine having your first ride in an airplane, in a contraption like the B-17. Anyway, they were busy with mops + pails when the pilot and I

climbed out of the plane, on the ground. What a green at-the-gills looking crew. The pilot told me that they often cut an engine or feather a propeller while on gunnery missions. That just about is enough to make the gunners want to jump. They think that if one engine quits, it is time to jump.

We watched the G.I.s chasing young girls up and down the streets of town

Here's a few more figures on the Fort. At maximum performance in combat, she'll burn 533 gallons of gas per hour. When going from ground level to 25,000' on a mission, it takes 30 minutes, the fort will go 185 miles on course, and, she'll use up 350 gall[on]s of gas in that time. They figure that from the time the pilot starts the engine[s] until he takes off, he uses 40 gallons, just taxiing and warming up the engines. On the other hand, the B-17 can be operated, in emergencies, at only 120 gallons per hour.

Saturday night, I went into Panama City, where I waited until 8:30 to get a steak at the elite place to eat in town. It was really choice too ($1.50). Then, we watched the G.I.s chasing young girls up and down the streets of town for a while before returning to the field at 11:00. (5/7/44)

An unusual thing happened about one o'clock. One of the lieutenants who was getting some instrument time in an A.T.-6 came in + landed without putting his wheels down. That's a bad mistake in these days when they are becoming more + more strict. It'll probably cost him a good fine, for negligence or something. He simply left his wheels retracted + came in on the belly, bending the propeller and twisting the under part of the fuselage a trifle. Most embarrassing, I must say! When they took the plane away, all they had to do was hoist it up, lower the wheels and tow it in. (5/8/44)

I had a little chance to fly instruments and "play around" in the clouds

This morning, I went on a "camera mission," in which the gunners merely had their guns loaded with film. They were taking pictures of a B-26 "Marauder" which kept attacking us as we flew in formation with another fort. With the complicated radio system on the fort, we were able

to switch to dance music + the news for most of the morning. I had a little chance to fly instruments and "play around" in the clouds as the mission only lasted for 2 ½ of the 4 ½ hour flying period. The pilots must get the time, regardless of the length of the gunners' mission.

Desiring a change from the food here, I went into town (12 miles as it is, by bus) for some chicken which was spoiled by some foolish sauce that they put over it down here.

A notice on the board today indicates that we'll have to spend 24 hours in bivouac camp. It's an order to all personnel on the post. All enlisted men have it for a week. That will undoubted[ly] amount to an overnight picnic in the woods. It shouldn't do anyone any harm, I shouldn't think. (5/9/44)

Today, I received the wallet from John Black. It is evidently an expensive one, made of pigskin. He had the wings impressed upon the leather, in gold, on the outside and he had "Lieut. George Neilson" in gold letters on the inside. I immediately put it into service, replacing the one which I have been using for about 4 years. (5/10/44)

We had ground school all day, lectures on the electrical system of the B-17 in the morning and in the afternoon, we had a demonstration of the radio compass and direction finder. There are 20 miles of electric wiring on the B-17, included in its 12 circuits. It draws its current from three 24-volt batteries which are charged by generators from each engine. We spent the afternoon learning how to tune the innumerable transmitters and receivers which are located in the radio compartment. I guess it's all just one more reason why a B-17 costs a quarter of a million dollars. This evening, rain + thunderstorms prevented a scheduled night transition ride from taking place. So, I went to the post theatre at 8:00 to see "Pin-up Girl." In case you don't recall it, it's a pleasant Technicolor musical with Betty Brable, Martha Raye, Joe E. Brown, etc. in it. (5/10/44)

They shot out the 2nd engine before the left wing fell off

This afternoon, I flew on an actual gunnery mission for which they seemed to put a ton of ammunition on the airplane. After experiencing

all kinds of difficulty with gauges + radio, we finally got started at 1:15. The pilot was a fellow who had returned from being shot down over Germany. He was in the raid on Schweinfurt, in which the Americans lost so *heavily. He said that about all of his formation were destroyed in that melee. He said that on his plane they shot out the 2nd engine before the left wing fell off. Anyway, everybody got out of the plane, by parachute. Then, it took him 3 ½ months to return to England, by staying "off the main roads" + not being interred. He said that he got back quickly, since it takes some fellows 6 months to get back.

He was a decent fellow and he let me do most of the flying over to the "splash range." The "splash range" is an immense lagoon-like bay which is located some 30 miles up the coastline by the town of Apalachicola. In this bay, there are markers which point out the limits of the course we fly the plane around at only 500' altitude, while the gunners shoot at the water, noticing the path of the bullet splashes on the water. (5/11/44)

*On each of the two raids on Schweinfurt and Regensburg, on August 14 and October 14, 1943, sixty heavy bombers were lost along with six hundred crew members, for a total of 120 planes and 1,200 men.[13]

In aerial combat in the ETO, heavy bombers commonly flew at altitudes approaching 25,000 feet, where the temperatures were -40° or colder. The gunners were on their feet in their positions for most of the flights, which could exceed eight hours. During combat, they stood several inches deep in spent shell casings, wearing oxygen masks and electrically heated suits. It was a wonder they were able to function in such extreme conditions, spraying the "bandits," as they called the enemy fighters who flew at the plane from all directions, with short bursts of .50-caliber machine gun ordnance. Men were known to have dislodged jams by banging their weapons with their frozen hands. Frostbite, which could occur in seconds of flesh exposure at high altitudes, was the cause of half the injuries sustained by returning crews.[14]

Also I noticed by the tone of the general and special orders as issued by post headquarters, that innumerable men are being sent to various

schools for training in connection with the new super-plane which dwarfs the B-17. It is the B-29. Evidently there will be quite a bit heard about this plane before long. I noticed that the last group of co-pilots, which went to Westover Field were all assigned to B-24s. So, there's no telling what the outcome of all this might be.

This afternoon, we had a 3-hour lecture and demonstration on the "Hamilton Standard Constant Speed Full-Feathering Hydromantic Propeller." This is the type used on the B-17. Each propeller weighs about 500 lbs. and costs several thousands of dollars. They are made of aluminum. The propeller blades actually will turn in a range of 35o, by using engine oil-pressure through a governor which is located in the cockpit. (5/12/44)

Today, I received a letter from Junior. He explained how incapable and inefficient the men he is working with seem to be. I guess that his training at Leavenworth has made these duties very much "duck soup." Junior must have the stuff, for I guess he's working with important "stuff." Yet, he seems to find his duties relatively simple in relation to what they're supposed to be. He says that those big brass hats in Washington tend to pass along problems to him that they cannot handle themselves. That, alone, makes him dislike Washington. Anyways, he wants to know all about the B-17. (5/14/44)

Adolf has not found the formula

Yesterday afternoon, we had a demonstration of the "fuel transfer" system on the B-17. It is to teach us how they change gas from one tank to another while in flight. It is all a problem of electric pumps + shut off valves. I don't believe that I ever explained to you just what the secret (+ it's no secret, now) is to why American planes have more power at high altitudes than the enemy. It is all due to the turbo-supercharger which all combat planes employ to maintain all the power of their engines at high altitudes. By means of an exhaust-driven "bucket wheel" which in turn causes air to be impelled into the engine at a higher rate than is natural at high altitudes. Here's the trick. There's only very few people who know the secret formula for tempering the steel in the bucket wheel. This wheel

rotates at 21,000 revolutions per min. The mystery is how this metal can stay together at such a speed. Adolf, with all the time he's had to study our planes, has not found the formula for making the metal which becomes a part of such an efficient supercharger. (5/14/44)

George offered an interesting insight on gunnery training that contrasts sharply with pilot training in terms of hours in the air.

It was "Oklahoma Gal," a veteran of 203 combat missions

We had a group of green horns, again, on a camera mission. There was only one B-17 + we had a P-40 as an attack ship. Actually, the gunners don't get much accomplished. For, by the time the boys with the P-40s or the B-26s get around to meeting the B-17s, half the time is used up. Besides that, all the flying time that the gunners do get is concerned with getting used to the thrill of flying. You see, they get a 6 week course, but, they only fly during the last week or so. Actually, then, they accomplish very little in the air. Yet, they give them gunner's wings. An old sergeant told me that they don't learn until they get to combat. Most of their training is concerned with the complex operation of the Martin, the Bendix, the Sperry, or the Consolidated turret. These turrets are all hydraulically operated + they have them on the ground for the boys to practice operating.

Incidentally, I flew in an old Model "E" B-17. It was "Oklahoma Gal," a veteran of 203 combat missions. She has 8 Jap planes + 10 ships to her credit; and, there are 5 purple hearts on her side. Yet, she still flies pretty well, patched up as she is. There are few B-17s with 203 missions around, these days. (5/15/44)

Five different books of forms

In the afternoon we had a lecture on all the various forms which have to be filled out for one airplane for one day. To begin with, the lineman who fills out the pre-flight in the morning has to make various entries in the form "41B" which determines the daily mechanical status of the airplane. These entries are like journal entries in an accountant's book.

Then, the pilot fills out the customary "form I + IA" which is always in the airplane. This gives a record of flying time, and mechanical status of the airplane. Any time a pilot does not like something about an airplane, he makes an entry in the "form IA," which then has to be complied with by a mechanic. Other forms that are kept, + follow the airplane wherever it goes, are the complete history of it, its engines + its propellers. (5/16/44)

When a plane was mortally wounded in combat, the crew was required to destroy all of the records carried on the plane so that these would not fall into the hands of the enemy. The Luftwaffe had a highly sophisticated intelligence network and used every scrap of information they could find to learn about Allied military plans, hardware, and personnel. Men who were captured and taken as POWs learned, when they were interrogated at the *Stalag Luft* prison camps, that the enemy had detailed information on each flier's home, family, and personal life. The interrogators used this to convince the fliers that there was no point in trying to hold back information, as the Luftwaffe had it all already. Of course if they actually had, there would be no point in the interrogation.[15]

They told us, today, about a colonel who was once on this field who tore up a B-17, while flying under a bridge. For the rest of his army time, a good part of his money will go towards paying for that plane according to his court-martial. That same man was charged $800. by Uncle Sam, when he moved his piano from Tyndall Field to Tampa on a B-17. Some guy?! (5/16/44)

After taking my "blindfold cockpit check," I was free for the afternoon. I was supposed to have taken blindfold tests in the B.T. + the A.T.-9; but, this is the first time that they have ever actually blind-folded me.

When I left the line at 1:30, another fellow convinced me that I ought to try a game of tennis. So, after taking some rackets and balls from the post gymnasium, we proceeded to play tennis for 2 hours, on the courts adjacent to the officers' club. By that time, we were hot and sun-tanned from the heat-giving sun; so, we got a nice dip in the warm waters of the Gulf. (5/17/44)

This afternoon, we took apart + replaced the wheel, + hydraulic strut assembly off a B-17, in ground school. That came under the heading of practical maintenance. (5/18/44)

Today, we spent most of the time in ground school. In the morning, groups of us were disassembling and re-assembling hydromatic propellers. In the afternoon, we figured out problems of fuel consumption and load adjustment, using a new computing device which the Boeing Company is waiting to have the army accept. Did you know that a capacity load of fuel on a B-17 is 11 tons?

I understand that the commanding general of the training command was on the field today; and, he was raising cane about lots of things, not enough saluting, etc. (5/19/44)

The water actually poured down my face and my flying suit was drenched

The weather continued to be blasting hot during the weekend and even the sea breeze failed to provide any relief from the sweltering heat. It is actually "melting hot," if you can imagine how hot that might feel! Anyhow, I started off on Saturday morning by firing the carbine rifle, in conformance with a post order that everyone must fire a familiarization period with that weapon. All the "brass hats" were at the rifle range on Saturday morning. All it amounted to was firing at tree stumps and roots. The only thing I learned was how the carbine feels when it goes off.

On Saturday afternoon, I flew for 4 ½ hours with the gunnery students. For the first part of the mission, we flew in formation with another B-17 while 2 P-40s were making passes at us all the time. I had a little opportunity to fly the plane in formation, at that time. Then, I flew from 8,000 ft. to 16,000 feet + stayed there for 30 minutes, a high altitude mission for the gunners; and, while oxygen is not essential for life at 16,000 feet, it is very helpful and the army insists on oxygen above 10,000 feet. Therefore, I had an opportunity to fly for about an hour, just breathing oxygen. It was cold enough at 16,000 ft. for the gunners to wear their heavy leather jackets, and we had the cabin heat on in the pilot's

compartment. In climbing and descending, there is a health-safety rule which stipulates that the rate of climb or descent be 500 feet per minute.

Now, this landing business was almost dramatic, this viciously hot day. When you're landing or taking-off the B-17, there's thousands of things to do: changing power settings, opening + shutting cowl flaps, superchargers, etc. That is without ever mentioning the amount of energy + strength that is necessary to kick that baby around. When I was flying, the water actually poured down my face, and my flying suit was drenched. You see, when you land the plane, one hand has to be on the throttles to keep adjusting the power settings. So, you have to twist that wheel with only one hand. It is a terrific strain on the left arm, and it requires a great deal of conditioning before it becomes easy. Then, as you approach the runway, you have to haul back on the control column because the big lummox wants to sag right down, instead of landing easily on the wheels. (5/21/44)

After some *hangar time* in which the copilots watched mechanics go through their regular aircraft inspections, the order of the day was to prepare for the bivouac (military encampment).

24 hours of living like a doughboy on maneuvers

I received a letter from Lt. Pendell at Blytheville. He says that he is going to have to wash out one of his present students. He also stated that he wished he were in a deal like ours. (5/22/44)

No letter last night, for I was entrenched 5 miles from the post on a bivouac! It was a matter of form 80 that we have had proper instruction in camping out, in addition to 24 hours of living like a doughboy on maneuvers. All in all, it was a lot of fun. It amounted to a 5 mile hike each way, pitching pup tents and mosquito netting and camping out. We marched out of the filed with fully loaded packs: blanket, tent, mess kit, canteen, cartridge case, and all! We even had leggings and tin hats to make us look like real live soldiers. Out on our camping grounds, we ate food prepared by the mess hall and brought out by truck. We also had a couple of gas attacks (tear gas), as we marched out along the road. The object

was to see how many of the boys remembered how to use their gas masks. Sleeping on the sandy ground was not too comfortable but we had ample netting to keep the tents free from bugs + mosquitos. (5/24/44)

The main news of the day seems to be that a temporary list of 50 names was posted tonight for possible shipment to the Third Air Force Replacement Depot, Tampa, Florida. That is a place from which you got assigned to permanent crews. It may be 3 days, 3 weeks or 3 months that I'd be there. There's never any way of knowing. In fact, I cannot be sure that I will go there even. However, the tentative list states that we will depart from Tyndall Field on June 3. (5/25/44)

George was always very careful with his money. With "everyone in debt" at the end of the month, he still had $14.00 and that after sending money home.

Well, here's what happened to the other boys' money: 1) Some fellows indulge in almost every night brawls at the various dives in town. 2) Some fellows gamble, at the club, with majors + captains. 3) Others squander their money on drinks, here, too. (5/25/44)

Despite George's avowed renunciation of the female species, he wrote frequently of how impressed he was with the letters of home-town pen pal Barbara Boyd, and was interested in attending her graduation if he got leave. He frequently mentioned that he knew the friendship would eventually "fade out," acknowledging that she will "change her ways" when she goes to college.

It is natural for an unmarried serviceman to want to have a girl back home. The personal depravities of military life are more bearable when a soldier knows he has someone who cares about him and anticipates his return. Perhaps this, more than anything else, is why Barbara Boyd and other female pen-pals held a fascination for George. The pragmatist that he was, he knew there was no immediate future in a relationship. She was going to college, and he was going to war. That eventuality was rapidly

approaching, and it is impossible that George would not have known it.

You might have to be a true Bostonian to fully appreciate the following story of George's encounter with Red Sox baseball great Ted Williams when he was a navy flier.

Ted "The Kid"

There is nothing too exciting to report except that I met Ted Williams, the great baseball player, yesterday, if you call that anything worth raving about. You see, a team from the Bronson Field Navy Flying School at Pensacola came over to play Tyndall Field yesterday afternoon. Amongst them were several ex-major league players including the illustrious Ted Williams of the Boston Red Sox. You remember how much of a fuss they made about him before he enlisted, and how great a flier he was going to be when he enlisted as a naval air cadet, and then how often he was publicized in the news. Well, he finally got his wings as a lieutenant in the Marine Air Corps, two weeks ago.

I met him when the naval boys came down to the flight line, after the game which Bronson won 8-6, to board 3 B-17s + be transported back to Pensacola. (Incidentally, they don't usually cart these camp teams around in Flying Fortresses, except when such celebrities as Williams are around. Then, it's all brass hat politics, etc.) I had volunteered to be copilot in one of the airplanes, so, I was waiting in [the] operations office when in strolled Williams, all questions + wanting to know all about the army's set-up on flying, etc.

Maybe you've heard of the cartoon "Sad Sack" which depicts the pathetic looking victim of circumstances in the G.I. army. Well, Williams sure looked like it personified! He had a set of filthy suntans which appeared worse than mine when I returned from bivouac on Tuesday, and his overseas cap looked as greasy as a mechanic's handkerchief. His long, lean face was replete with 3 weeks growth of beard at least. There is a brief outline of how one of America's great athletes, now a Marine officer, appeared!

He mentioned how he'd like to fly heavy airplanes, etc. Then, he said, he didn't care what they did with him now that he had his wings. He

wasn't fussy about working too hard, he said. He is beginning, this week, as an instructor at Bronson Field, where he received his wings. According to the commander, who was on the trip, Williams was no super-cadet + he's only an ordinary pilot, instead of the great pilot he was supposed to become. They said that he tried to "yes sir" his way into their good graces, after his boyish actions started him off on the wrong foot.

He was said to have more natural talent than either [Lou] Gehrig or Babe Ruth, but, he was content to act like a baby when the Red Sox were paying him $35,000 per season. He used to throw things at people who jeered him because of his temper. So, he became known as Ted "The Kid." Well, he sure talked like a brainless kid last night. Walking out he envied us who were on B-17s. Anyways, he rode back to Pensacola on one of the other planes, so, that was the last of the great Williams! He put his arm on my shoulder and said, "How about letting me fly it back?" I said, "I'm only the copilot + I'm not on your ship." "Well," he said, "someone will let me get into the seat, I'll fix that." P.S. He didn't get up front at all. (5/28/44)

One of the most vivid memories of my childhood was watching a Red Sox game on TV with Dad (George) when, in front of millions of viewers as well as a large stadium crowd, slugger Ted Williams struck out and chucked the bat into the bleachers, injuring a woman watching the game. George, who loved the Red Sox and admired the baseball prowess of the short-tempered Williams, was disappointed by this incident.

Twenty-one accidents in three days

The ride to Pensacola was just an uneventful trip over the shores of the Gulf for about 110 miles. For two hours, we + the 3 B-17s were the center of attraction to a great amount of naval personnel, including a couple of instructors. They treated us good, free Coca-Cola + very much trying to be polite!

I got an insight into a naval advanced flying school, and I was shocked to hear what the Navy tolerates. An ensign told me that they average 4 wheels-up landings each week. For that, they ordinarily can you in the army. All they do is make the cadets help repair the planes. 4 weeks ago,

they had 21 accidents in 3 days, including 6 mid-air collisions. That's the Navy training for you! Also, they don't get any carrier landings until they are commissioned!

I guess that General Butler was here, raising cane about the condition of this post; so, they have an "eager" movement on, now! (9/28/44)

Today, everybody ran to the telegraph office

Today, everybody ran to the telegraph office, once they discovered that the others had been granted their leaves. Finally, and still skeptical about its being proper, I made my move about 6:00 tonight.

This afternoon, I flew on a gunnery mission for 3 ½ hours, despite turbulent air and threatening thunder squalls that made the sky look like the devil's palace. The air being rough + turbulent, naturally, all the gunners became sick + didn't accomplish much of their picture-taking mission.

There is much talk about the new Boeing "Superfortress," the B-29, which will dwarf the B-17 and is destined to be a big factor in the war. The trend seems to be towards the B-29, B-32 + the B-24, with the B-17 (Flying Fortress) starting down the ladder. Of course, the effect will not be felt until after the B-29 is well tested in combat.

That is all for tonight and remember don't plan for me if I should come home. It will be like returning from a vacation, this time. (9/29/44)

The B-29's expanded range was needed for missions that traversed large distances and were particularly suited to the war in the Pacific, where bases for staging bombing missions over Japan were located over 1,000 miles from the targets.[16]

All the sandwiches, ginger ale, and beer you desire

This being "free night" at the officer's club, I am amongst the mob which is taxing the facilities of this domicile, at the moment. All the sandwiches, ginger ale + beer you desire is "on the house" tonight. It is uncomfortably hot this evening; so, everyone is around taking advantage of the situation.

This afternoon, I received a telegram stating: "15 day delay en route granted. Wire special order par. No., leave address, + serial number when transferred." It was signed by Col. MacArthur of the 3rd Air Force Replacement Depot. That means that, barring accidents + if I am put on the orders for Saturday, I will be on my way home, starting sometime Saturday afternoon or evening. (5/30/44)

The May 30 letter was the last one sent from Tyndall Field. Following fifteen days at home, he was on the move again, still in the Deep South where he had been for over a year. The next stop: Tampa, Florida, further in the hot plain of the subtropical Sunshine State.

Chapter 12

Combat Crew Assembly

Third Air Force Replacement Depot
Tampa, Florida

The Enemy on the Run, Summer 1944

Operation Overlord, the D-Day invasion that smashed Hitler's Atlantic Wall, was a disaster for Germany. In the days after June 6, 1944, thousands of men and tons of materiel poured ashore where the defending Germans had been swept from the bunkers above the beaches of Normandy. The Luftwaffe had only sixty flight-ready planes to oppose the landings while the Allies had 2,100 heavy bombers in England and 1,200 in Italy. Leaders of the Great Alliance met in London to plan the next phase of the offensive in the west. The strategy continued to focus on three types of targets: 1) armaments industries; 2) oil refineries; and 3) rail and transportation hubs. Reluctantly, the air forces were also drawn into tactical support for the armies that were rapidly advancing across France.

In the summer of 1944, 6,184 British citizens were killed by the V-1 and V-2 terror rockets that rained down on London and the channel ports. During an eighty-day period, some one hundred of the "flying bombs" were deployed each day. Rather than demoralize the Britons as intended, they aroused their rage to fight with an amplified vengeance.[1]

For six weeks, the Allied ground operation was locked in a deadly entrenchment within eight miles of the French coast. US Gen. Omar Bradley devised a bold plan to break what was feared would become a World War I type stalemate. In the operation code named Cobra, one thousand heavy bombers would drop 50,000 bombs to blast a wide hole in the German lines near the town of St.

Lo in the "Falaise Pocket." Thus Bradley was able to take advantage of the despoiling of the German rail network and advanced in a miraculous move known to history as the St. Lo breakout. In all, the Battle of Normandy resulted in 400,000 German casualties and 225,000 Allied, including 8,536 airmen killed or missing. The battle, one of most ferocious of the war, was a standout in the use of air power as a tactical support for ground operations.[2]

Though the air barons viewed tactical operations as a distraction from their strategic bombing campaigns, the St. Lo breakout was to prove decisive in reclaiming Europe. Following the breakout in a rapid blitz across France, Gen. George Paton led a hundred-day drive that brought the Allied armies to the Siegfried line, the western border of Germany. The occupation government in Paris surrendered to the Allies on August 25. The armies were postured for an assault on the German homeland.[3]

With the Luftwaffe marginalized, the skies were wide open for the Allied air forces to destroy the Nazi juggernaut's infrastructure. The campaign would not be easy, for despite the substantial reduction of the Luftwaffe, there was the looming threat of a revolutionary new German plane, the Messerschmitt 262 (Me262) turbojet fighter, the world's first operational jet plane.[4] Additionally, as traditional German fighter operations contracted, deadly fire from antiaircraft (flak) installations expanded proportionally.[5]

The Dreadful Mathematics of Flak

Short for the German word f*lugzeugabwehrkanone (floog'-tsoig-ahp'-vare-kan-own'-en)*, "flak" or antiaircraft shells varied in bore and other specs. As small as 12.5 mm, the larger shells were 88, 105, and 128 mm, but the most common was the 88 mm flak. The 88 was a twenty-pound shell that could reach 35,000 feet. Its burst radius of thirty feet could damage or destroy a four-engine aircraft. The guns were deployed in batteries of four and required crews of ten to twelve to pass, load, and fire the shells, achieving a maximum fire rate of sixty per minute. The planes were tracked by optical predictor or radar. The objective of the flak gunners was

to saturate a three-dimensional box in the location of the bomb-run.[6] Fortunately for the Allied crews, flak was terribly inaccurate above 10,000 feet, with respect to individual shells. Statistically, it required 8,500 rounds of 88 mm shells to down one bomber.[7] Yet the enormity of the weapon's use compensated largely for this. Proximity fuses were designed to detonate a shell when it was near an aircraft, but the system did not work well.

> By the end of 1943 the Germans had nearly 10,000 high-velocity anti-aircraft guns and 500,000 men firing huge numbers of shells into the skies over the Reich and hitting little.[8]

Flak cannons weighed up to thirty tons but were mobile. They were mounted on trucks and railway cars. Flak towers up to thirteen stories high were built in large cities. Later in the war, many civilians, including women, were used to work the guns.[9]

When flak was present during a bomb run, as it usually was until the very end of the war, most planes came back with damage, and it was not uncommon for a plane to sustain hundreds of holes, engines destroyed, and other forms of external damage. Over the course of the war, flak was an effective weapon, even if it did take thousands of rounds to bring down a plane.[10] Miller[11] reported that 5,400 American planes were downed by flak as opposed to 4,300 shot down by fighters.

War on the Reich's Heavy Industry

Until the end of World War II, Germany's heavy industries were controlled by huge conglomerates, the most well-known of which were I.G. Farben (chemicals) and Krupp (steel and armaments). Many of the heavy industrial plants of the conglomerates were concentrated in small areas and thus became easy targets for Allied bombers. The bombing and air battles at the coal hydrogenation plants at Leuna involved 6,630 American bombers. So heavily was the Leuna complex defended by antiaircraft guns, 119 planes and 1,280 airmen in three attacks were lost, and not a single bomb fell on the oil works, the targets being impossible to

see in the dense pall of smoke. The scene over Leuna was akin to the atmosphere above an erupting volcano, a hellish maelstrom of opaque smoke, poison gas, debris from disintegrating planes, ubiquitous explosions, and parachuting fliers.[12] Blechhammer, another major target of the Fifteenth in Silesia, was a complex of two oil works.[13] As previously described, the bombing of the massive petroleum complex at Ploesti, Romania, was another major undertaking of the Italy-based Fifteenth AAF in 1944.

In the summer of 1944, the survival rate in the air war was one in three, an improvement in the one in five the previous year but still horrific. Men reacted to this carnage by becoming desensitized, their minds calloused to death and destruction. They became hardened, having taught themselves to feel nothing. They lost the lust for life, according to Miller. Men turned to drink. Despondency possessed the crews; despair knocked at the door.[14]

Frustrating the strategic bombing command, the ability of German industry to rebound from aerial destruction was astounding, made possible by hundreds of thousands of slave laborers from the Reich's vassal states in Eastern Europe. In the end, it was the repeated bombing of strategic targets that ground the German war machine to a fraction of its pre-1944 strength and ultimately cost them the war. But it was not without the combined achievements of air, sea, and ground forces that this was realized. Miller[15] described the "fatal trap":

> "The combined effects of direct destruction and the diversion of resources denied German forces approximately half their battle-front weapons and equipment in 1944," concluded historian Richard Overy. In trying to protect the industries that produced the oil and explosives the Wehrmacht depended upon to survive the fight, [Nazi Minister of Armaments Albert] Speer was forced to deprive it of manpower and equipment it badly needed.

German aircraft production continued at secret plants hidden in the forests. A resurgent Luftwaffe with three thousand aircraft emerged in September. But this force was shallow in terms of qualified pilots and was more of a desperation move than a serious threat to Allied victory.[16] With the Luftwaffe on the run, the key industries of the Reich crumbling, and Allied armies closing in from the southern, eastern, and western fronts, the possibility of reversing the tide for Germany was a fading hope. Hitler and his henchmen, fanatically believing in the ultimate triumph of their master race, placed their hopes in miracle weapons yet to be produced and a final last stand by the faltering legions of their crusade. In reality, of which the Nazi leadership had limited grasp, the war was functionally lost for Germany at D-Day. In its twisted fantasies, the tyrannical Nazi beast would continue its rampage, stubbornly persisting in a hopeless cause while their nation and people suffered the most diabolical bombardment in the history of warfare. The coming nine months would witness slaughter and destruction on a scale never before known on Earth.

As the tempest raged, George Neilson was entering the final stages of preparation for descending on the Armageddon of Europe.

COMBAT CREW ASSEMBLY CENTER, TAMPA, FLORIDA

In [June], we were sent to this personnel assignment depot, called a "repple-depple." Plant Park is in Tampa. The purpose of the 3 week stay, here, was to be assimilated with men—officers and enlisted men, who had been trained through the various specialties that made up a bomber crew. We were put together as combat crews. It was planned for these assembled crews to train together, as a team, then go forward to be assigned to a combat, war-zone theater.

The combat crew of the B-17 was as follows:

OFFICERS	ENLISTED MEN
Pilot	Radio Operator
Co-Pilot	Nose Gunner
Navigator	Left Waist Gunner
Bombardier	Right Waist Gunner

Lower Turret Gunner
Tail Gunner

(G.H.N., 1991)[17]

Only one letter, written on June 18, 1944, was found in the GHN letter archive for the brief stint at Tampa. George was on leave (technically travel delay) for the first two weeks in June. He left Panama City for the trip home on June 3, 1944. After a short time in Medford, he arrived at the Third USAF Replacement Depot at Tampa on Sunday, June 18. The set-up at Plant Park was a time of transitory activity and processing in conditions that were as primitive as any George had yet encountered. The lone letter of June, nonetheless, is worthy of appreciable inclusion.

He was a fortress gunner; and, he is now a prisoner of war

Here I go again! I arrived here at 3:00 this afternoon after the to-be expected miserable, sweltering journey from Washington. My trip to Washington was very enjoyable and comfortable, to say the least. The Pullman was cool and it rode very smoothly, allowing me to get considerable sleep, as much as could be expected since I was going away again. Therefore, I awoke rested and clean in time to get off the train at 9:00 a.m. in Washington.

After waiting in a mob in the terrific, sultry heat which was in Washington, I finally was heaved and jammed onto an ancient coach – train towards Richmond. It was crowded mostly with women + squealing babies, all the way to Richmond. During that run, I was seated in an upright chair in a stuffy old dining car which, I believe, had been sealed rather than ventilated. Anyhow, I finally got a chair on a reclining-chair coach around Saturday noon; but, that was nearly unbearable because the air-conditioning system had become inoperative. So, I spent all of Saturday afternoon + night being bathed with cinders and smoke soot because so many of the people decided that air + cinders would be better than heat + suffocation.

At any rate, I was off on the 9:00 train, down the Florida west coast to Tampa. For a change, I had a cool, air-conditioned ride, most of this 6

hour ordeal. From Columbia, South Carolina to Jacksonville, I sat with a woman whose son was shot down over Hong Kong, two years ago. He was a fortress gunner; and, he is now a prisoner of war. She heard from him once or twice + answered his request for packages; but, she does not know if he ever gets anything. She worries constantly I guess. She can only write on an official say-so by the War Dept.

The entire trip was pretty miserable + it was all increased by a lonesomeness + home sickness that prevailed. I felt worse this time than on either of the two previous occasions. Besides, I didn't meet anybody I knew, until I got to Tampa.

Plant Park was originally part of the grounds of the Tampa Bay Hotel, which opened on January 31, 1891 by Connecticut entrepreneur and railroad magnate Henry B. Plant. Plant's vision was to construct a tropical paradise for northern visitors. Though the hotel closed in 1930, the park was preserved by Friends of Plant Park. During the war, aesthetic considerations were pushed aside for the expediency of the war effort.[18]

The living conditions are abominable

So, here I am in a set-up which used to be the Tampa Fair Grounds. It is a sort of classification center, where pilots, bombardiers, navigators, and gunners are gathered and assigned to permanent crews. Each type of personnel is located in a separate section of this park which itself is located right behind the main avenues of Tampa.

We will be here upwards of two weeks, meanwhile getting a physical check and awaiting shipment to a training field. While all other conveniences are available, we will have tent-covered shelters for our sleeping headquarters, if you can imagine such a thing. The living conditions are abominable, but that's the way it goes for a while, I guess.

They furnish crews from this depot to either McDill or Drew Fields, both of which are located on the outskirts of Tampa. One good thing about this place is that you only pay for what you eat here; and, there's not a one restriction of any kind, while we're here. Although the shacks are even more filthy than Nashville's. I guess that I can stand it for a while.

Judging from my first eyeful of Tampa, it is a great, large city with anything that you'd desire available. Plant Park here, is only a few steps from the main street + is located also directly behind an antiquated hotel which is occupied by Tampa University.

Anyway, I'm safe + sound in Plant Park, at least for now. So, I'll close now, with love, as ever, from George. (6/18/44)

In George's rather unorganized stash of Air Force memorabilia was found a copy of orders assigning him and his crew to travel to Gulfport, Mississippi, by rail on July 7, 1944. The names and crew positions of each member of "Crew No. 1051" were listed as follows:[19]

Rank	NAME	DET	PRIMARY POSITION
2D LT	KIEFER, THOMAS	1st	P (Pilot)
2D LT	NEILSON, GEORGE H	1st	CP (Co-Pilot)
Cpl	Conway, Thomas J	2nd	AMG (Engineer)
Cpl	Jones, Carl G	6th	ROG (Radio Man)
Cpl	Ingwell, Everett W	8th	AG (Armorer)
Pfc	Gallego, Elfren	5th	AROG (Ball Turret)
Pfc	Frank, Arnold F		AAMG (Ast. Armorer)
Pfc	Youell, Mark E	4th	AAG (Tail Gunner)

These men were to go as a group to Gulfport to train together for combat missions on a B-17 model G Flying Fortress bomber. They would then ship together overseas and serve in the Fifteenth Air Force, Foggia, Italy. They would live in a tent city, fly combat missions, and witness the end of World War II in Europe. It is impossible to imagine, despite all the books, films, and diaries that have emerged in the seven decades after the armistice, what these men and their comrades actually experienced in those immortal months.

At Gulfport AAF (Mississippi), two more crewmen were added to what was then "Crew #132." They were Lt. Kendall E. Foster, Navigator, and Lt. Worth Dunn, bombardier.

Chapter 13

Combat Crew Training

Gulfport Air Force Base
Gulfport, Mississippi

War Is Hell

To illustrate life aboard a heavy bomber, the following story is told by Technical Sergeant Dwight N. Miller, radio operator on Lady Stardust II (452nd Bomb Group) of a nightmarish return from a mission to Brux, Czechoslovakia, on May 12, 1944.

> Our radio room had the old open hatch and I could see and hear everything plainly. The sky was full of tracers. In the smoke a tail and parts of a fuselage went past. Some ships were on fire and 846 to the right was flaming from No. 3 [engine]. Focke-Wulfs came right over us. Two exploded to the right, one to the left, and some were on fire. A P-47 [U.S. fighter] was going down burning. Someone bailed out and immediately his chute opened, right in the midst of everything. A Focke-Wulfe exploded by his side and his 'chute folded in rags. I didn't fire a shot because three B-17s were above us. I heard something banging, like a base drummer going mad. It was the landing flap on the right wing. It was hanging down waving in the wind and hitting the wing.
>
> Then I heard a sharp snap. The lieutenant formation officer in the tail turret of the crippled lead ship above had bailed out and he had fallen right into the Plexiglas nose before bouncing off and

> into our right wing. Some 'stringy stuff' slid back across my window. The lieutenant's harness and lines were hanging on our wing. Our bombardier and navigator were injured and thrown onto the catwalk. I opened the door and looked toward the cockpit. The nose was gone. Blood--a lot of it—and a terrific wind blinded me. I was covered from head to foot. It went on through the ship painting it red and freezing. The bomb bays were solid red and slippery. The blood came from the engineer "Uncle Dudley" Orcutt. The right side of his head was gone. He didn't look like Dud. I had no doubt he was dead.[1]

There were other casualties on board also. Lt. George H. Neilson would fly to the same target in December of that year. Such stories were common although not always so graphic. In most cases when such tales were recorded, there were survivors, though the plane may or may not have made it back to its base. In countless cases, the planes exploded or were obliterated in the air, and there were no survivors. Even those men who were not shot down saw too many planes go down in flames, their crews having had no chance to bail out. Such harrowing scenes had a psychological effect on crews. Initially it caused some of the now well-known symptoms of post-traumatic stress syndrome. But as such things became commonplace, some crew members became hardened, no longer able to feel the emotional wounds from witnessing such horrors. The numbing effect of this, whether an adaption or a wound in itself, was not readily reversed when a crewman's tour of combat was completed. Men returning from the bloody skies over Europe bore wounds that could not be treated with bandages, and many bore lifelong scars from this immersion in the cauldron of combat.[2]

There was a higher percentage of casualties among fliers than in any other service during World War II. Even when enemy fighters were scarce later in the war, the barrage of flak put up

by the hundreds of guns on the ground made bombing a lethally dangerous business. Although the Luftwaffe lost air superiority in the spring of 1944, its fighter wing continued to send up sorties, sporadic and doomed perhaps but still inflicting casualties on Allied bomber crews and their escorts until the German surrender.[3]

Unlike in the pressurized cabins of modern aircraft, World War II airmen had to fly in the uninhabitable atmosphere of low pressure, low oxygen, and extremely low temperatures. These conditions presented serious challenges to well-being and the ability to focus full mental and physical faculties on the task of fighting. To this misery add hostile enemy fighters, thousands of exploding flak shells, and the specter of flame-engulfed planes carrying buddies to their deaths, and it is little wonder the men were pushed to the brink of insanity.[4] Indeed, there were those who went over the brink and had to be grounded until they recovered, if they did at all. There is a myriad of stories of men who died on their first missions or their last missions.[5] One flier's fiancée was waiting for him at his base in East Anglia as he returned home from his last mission. When he arrived, he was dead, his face and body mauled beyond identification. The plane was routed to an alternate hardstand so that the girl would not have to see him.

Floyd E. Haupt, my father-in-law, flew fifty missions as a navigator on a B-24 of the 464th Bomb Group in the Fifteenth Air Force. Thirty-six hours after arriving at his base at Foggia, Italy, in 1944, the pilot of his training crew did not return from a mission and was presumed dead.[6] Of those who made it through their required number of missions (it varied from twenty-five to thirty-five), some wanted to keep flying, and so they did. Most had had their fill of war and were ready to go home. During the desperate days between the autumn of 1943 and the summer of 1944, some men reached their twenty-five missions before they had been overseas two months.

Weather was a major impediment, as central Europe was under cloud cover 75 percent of the year. Some missions were scrubbed on takeoff, signaled by a red light or flare from the control tower. Other times, the planes flew only to encounter

miserable weather over their targets. On many occasions, cloud cover shrouded the targets, and the bombs had to be jettisoned or dropped on *opportunity targets. Many pilots became disoriented and separated from their formations in the clouds, becoming easy prey for the Messerschmitts (Me109s) and Focke-Wulfs (FW190s), which often attacked four or five astride. The German fighters would frequently attack head-on at approaching speeds in excess of 500 mph and raise up over the noses of the bombers miliseconds from impact. Continuing a tradition from the First World War, the German bandits used the blinding rays of the sun to conceal their ambush. So it is well that the airmen had combat practice with their aircraft at training bases before being deployed overseas. Judging by George's experience with the sick boys in the back of the Fort, it is easy to see what a catastrophe it would have been for the men to start flying in combat without the dry runs in training.[7]

*Opportunity targets were unplanned alternates where the crew felt that some good could be done.

Combat Crew Training

Prior to being shipped overseas, combat crews were sent to one of the staging bases like Gulfport Air Force Base where they gained practice working as a team on the aircraft they were to fly in combat. Tillman[8] describes this part of the training:

> There was a building-block approach to unit training, which was conducted in three phases. The first phase, focused on individual crewmembers, introduced pilots to their planes and molded ten individuals into a combat team. In the second phase, crews concentrated on formation flying and aerial gunnery, usually progressing from three-plane flights to six- and nine-plane squadrons. In the final phase, crews conducted long-range navigation flights, often over water. Training focused

on essential combat tasks with more gunnery and often daily bombing.

GULFPORT AIR FORCE BASE, GULFPORT, MISSISSIPPI

Our crew was assigned to Gulfport, for combat crew training. From Plant [Park], that meant another long, dirty train ride to still another temporary base of tarpaper buildings, etc. Another factor of difference was that we were there during August and September. Along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico, it was extremely hot and extremely humid—day and night, every single day we were there.

We did lots of flying, including considerable numbers of hours flying in formation with other B-17s, because in combat, B-17s typically flew in squadrons of up to 14 planes, flying very close to each other.

We also got lots of time practicing in turbulent, stormy weather. For, on the Gulf Coast, thunderstorms developed practically every day of the summer, almost precisely at 6:00 p.m. They resulted from the change in temperature of the air, as the sun went down. The air over the land began to cool from the summer sun and heat. When the landmass became cooler than the water on the gulf, the cool, moist air from the gulf would move in, drawing up the hot air rising from the land causing convection, resulting in cumulonimbus clouds being formed, carrying turbulence and clouds of moisture to high altitudes. When the convection would level off, an anvil-head would form at the top (sometimes 35,000 to 45,000 ft. high). The water would let loose, the thunder and lightning would generate from the convection and changes in temperature. Alas, a violent thunderstorm. It certainly would cause us to break formation and wait for the storm to pass beyond the base before we would try to land. The storms would last about ½ hour, each day, but generally when we were trying to land from a hot, tiresome 6 hr. formation flight. (G.H.N., 1991)[9]

July, August, and September was a time of less pressure than George had experienced in the Battle of Arkansas, and he enjoyed some of the privileges of his new status as an officer, including a less brutal sleep schedule. Still, in the weeks before his overseas shipment, his wake-up time became erratic, and it was common for him to be woken for duty at 2:30 a.m. This is not surprising in view of the fact that the bomber crews were awakened around 3:00 a.m. for long missions over Central Europe. Clearly the training program wisely took this into consideration, readying the men for such incommodious living before they arrived at an overseas base.

George's brother Bob had an adventuresome spirit which led to some controversy in the family. While serving on the West Coast, he met and courted Catherine Sill of Washougal, Washington. The couple had a whirlwind wedding on July 15, 1944 in California. Many wartime weddings were performed on short notice. The future was very uncertain, and many lovers wanted to tie the knot before the war separated them. Kay and Bob had a wonderful marriage that endured until Bob went home to his maker in 1982. It took some time for the conservative Neilsons to process Bob's hurried marriage, and George again became Bob's advocate in soothing their mother's thoughts.

At Blytheville, I was recommended for B-26s and B-25s

This fellow, Kiefer, who flies with me, or with whom I fly, is 26, married + has a baby, as I told you. By the way, his wife, whom he met while in training in California, comes from Spokane, Washington. So, it was one of those over-night affairs.

I've forgotten whether or not I told you that I saw my pink proficiency card when we first got here. That is the one that you're never supposed to see. It had my recommendations from previous schools on it. At Blytheville, I was recommended for B-26s + B-25s. Those are twin-engine planes for which I had hoped. But, since they took no one for twin-engine + since they gave those who preferred twin-engines, co-pilot jobs on 4 engine planes, here I am! Then, at Tyndall, I was recommended for "First Pilot on B-17." Anyhow, it helps to know that is on my record.

Back at Basic, because of the trouble I had to start with, the comment on my record was "slow to assimilate instruction." (This all pertains to flying, you understand.) Lonstrup's comment was, "Eager! – anxious to succeed." While I was at Helena. Now that I'm commissioned, the only commentary that is significant is the one at Tyndall, which is good!

P.S. Here is a 3rd A.F. patch. I don't think that I'll put it on my shirts, though. It may be too temporary. (7/18/44)

George maintained correspondence with his Boston University Alumni while in the AAF. His contact at B.U. made a comment that reflected the low enrollment in institutions of higher education during World War II. One study[10] of thirty-one private men's colleges revealed a 78.7 percent drop in enrollment. Many schools avoided bankruptcy only because special training programs contracted by the defense department, such as the CTD at Grove City College, compensated for the enrollment contraction.

We are only going to get pictures of German combat airplanes

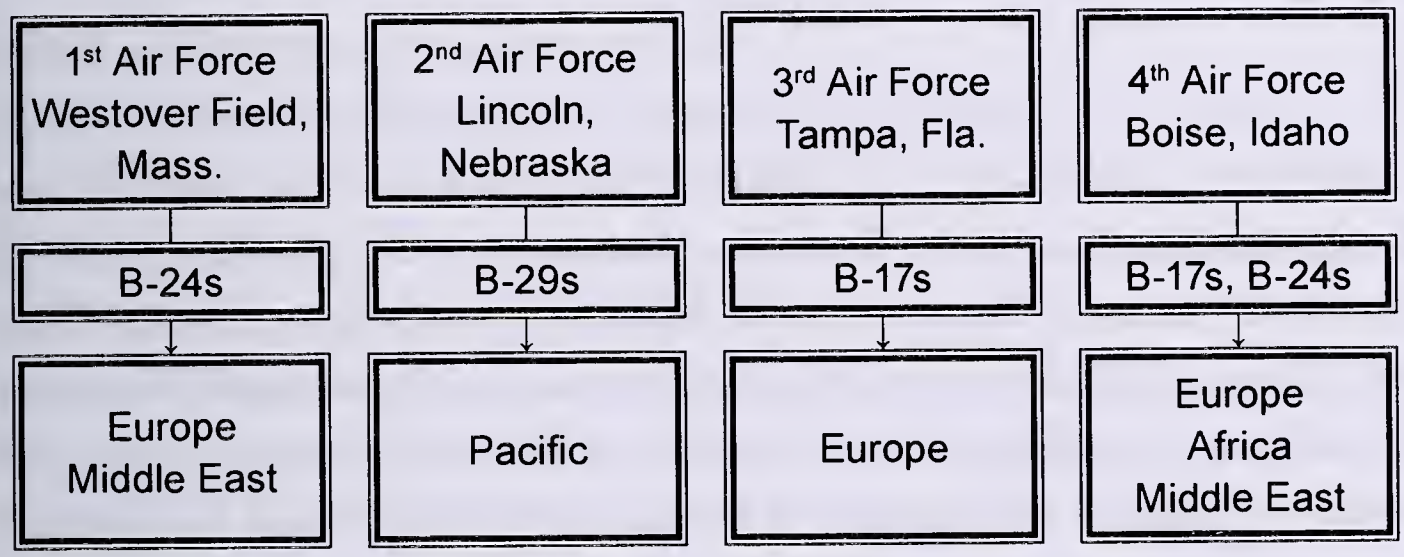
[John Waters of the B.U. Alumni Office] stated that they expect less than 300 students to begin the fall semester at C.B.A. I don't believe that 300 students will fill that beautiful big building, do you?

This morning, we began on ground school. I had so-called "engineering" from 9:00 'til 12:00. That is a complete duplication of what we had at Tyndall. But, there's always plenty to do + learn about the B-17. You see, we are going to learn, beforehand, what all the first crews of any B-17s had to learn as they went along. From 12:00 'til 1:00, we had aircraft recognition. That is the first time we have had that since we were at Blytheville. Incidentally, we are only going to get pictures of German combat airplanes (Does that give you a hint?).

In ground school, officers go to a separate ground school, while the enlisted men go to classes adapted to their specific jobs. For example, the gunners receive courses primarily in gunnery + aircraft recognition. (You'd be shocked to learn how many of our fighter planes have been shot down by our own bombers.) (7/20/44)

In modern vernacular, what George was referring to in the foregoing is known as friendly fire. It is a huge problem in the bedlam of war.

Here's an outline of how the 4 continental U.S. air forces train its bomber crews + send them out:



This evening, I had two worn out porcelain fillings replaced in my teeth, thereby completing my dental work, except for two sets of bridges, which they are going to measure me for tomorrow evening. They are anxious to have everyone's teeth ready to pass inspection at P.O.E. [*point of embarkation*].

Oh, yes! I got a card from Bob at San Antonio, where he says he is having a few days honeymoon. He says his wife wants to meet me. (7/20/44)

Today, I was up higher than I ever was in my life before!

Today, I was up higher than I ever was in my life, before! I was up at 22,000 feet for nearly 4 hours. That's almost 4 ½ miles in the air. The temperature of the outside air was 20 degrees, up there, and in the pilot's compartment, we were very comfortable with nothing extra except woolen boots because of the draft around our feet. The rest of the crew, however, had to wear leather jackets + wool-lined pants, because the metal fuselage is like an ice-box when cold.

We went on a high altitude mission, in formation. The purpose was to give us a chance to fly in formation, at high altitude; meanwhile, you

get the vital practice in working with an oxygen mask on. There were two, 3-ship elements taking off at exactly 11:00. In order to make it a simulated bombing mission, it was a 500 mile trip, with two "bomb runs," in it. Of course, there were no bombardiers in the planes and there were no bombs dropped.

Flying formation is very grueling

As soon as we circled into formation we headed for altitude en route to Meridian, Mississippi. At Meridian, they had the first "peel off" and simulated bombing run. Then, we flew on to Munroe, Louisiana. At Munroe, they made a pass at the Navigator Training Station, there. Then, we returned to Gulfport. It took almost 4 hours to go around that course. It was very beautiful up there, with 3 + 4 layers of clouds beneath. You could see 200 or 300 miles, I'll bet, at 22,000 ft. Flying formation is very grueling + a basic principle of bomber flying; so, both Kiefer + I alternated at the controls, throughout the mission.

We had more worries with the crew than anything else, though. Naturally, they were inexperienced + fearful of the use of oxygen. As we were climbing to altitude at the outset, we found them all scurrying around wondering if their masks fitted + if they were going to be cold, etc. At 10,000 ft., everyone is supposed to put on their oxygen masks. However, I had to go back + help two of the boys get into theirs, at 12,000 feet. To my great dismay, both the tail gunner + the bottom turret gunner had gotten sick and we had only been off the ground for ½ hour! That was a fine how do you do. Both of them were sprawled in the radio compartment, where the radio man could assist them. Since there was only one oxygen outlet in the radio room, the two sick boys had to use emergency lines. There, they lay for 6 hours, sick as dogs. One of them kept throwing up + the radio operator kept calling up to us, anxiously reporting the condition of his buddies. My, how they must have suffered throughout that ride

Needless to say, I can hardly stay awake now. Altitude makes you very weary, you see. About the boys who got sick, they'll have a couple of more chances to keep from getting sick. If they can't help it, we'll have to get someone to take their places. For, that just cannot be tolerated. The boys

either must adapt themselves to riding in the back of the fort or they won't be on the crews. There is quite a bit of that amongst the enlisted members of the crews around here, too!

We figured that we burned about 1800 gallons of gasoline in 6 hrs. today. I guess that is more than you burn with your "B" card, isn't it Betty? (7/21/44)

It was very close, but we made it!

Well, I've just returned from the flying line after 6 hours in the air, plus all the "rigamoroll" on the ground before + afterwards. For the third consecutive flying day, we had high altitude formation that is plenty tiring, although the plane handles like a kite in the rarified atmosphere. It was very pretty, today. We had 16 ships in formation + we flew at 22,000 feet. Kiefer flew most of the way over + I flew it back. We had a little anxiety over our oxygen supply today. We had a couple of leaks in the system, so, the pressure barely held out 'til we got back to 10,000 feet on the way back. The enlisted men kept reminding us over the interphone that their pressure was low, and we knew for sure that our own supply was almost gone.

Yes, 16 airplanes soaring over the clouds at 22,000 feet, all stacked + deployed in battle formation are very distinctive and beautiful to watch. From the ground, they'd be scarcely visible unless the sky was unusually clear.

By the way, nobody showed up to see Frank Sinatra in "Step Lively," but it was a very funny picture – Carney + Brown, Adolf Menjow, George Murphy are all in it. You certainly would like to see it. However, Frank Sinatra doesn't seem to be very popular at the army camps, so the theatre was empty! (7/25/44)

Today, being my day off, I discovered a good swimming pool at the swank, "Edgwater Gulf" Hotel in Biloxi. I spent the afternoon there. Incidentally, the Gulf is contaminated in this area, because of sewage, so it's just as well not to go in, anyhow.

Here's a point of interest! They don't give too much night flying around here! Why? Because U.S. bombers in Europe scarcely, if ever, go out at night. British bombers do all the night work. (7/26/44)

This Neilson understood correctly. Until late in the war, this differentiation held true. The British were bombing city centers and residential areas, politely referred to as morale targets. The Germans called this indiscriminate city wrecking terror bombing. American missions hit strategic targets. There was a brief period in February 1945 when the United States participated in the daytime terror bombing at Berlin, Dresden, and other targets in Eastern Germany. Germans called the Allied fliers Luftgangsters (air gangsters) and Terrorflieger (terror fliers), calling to the public's mind the brutality of such warfare. Of course, this was done without apology for the Stukas, Heinkels, and Junkers that dropped terror and death from the skies of Warsaw, London, Rotterdam, and Stalingrad, and the tanks that burned western Russia and Belorussia to the ground. That and the murderous stampede of men and machines that overran most of Europe under the swastika from 1939 to 1942 are a strange backdrop for labeling Allied airmen as gangsters. Great Britain's Prime Minister Winston Churchill had tried to persuade the United States to join the British in their nighttime raids, especially in 1942–43 when the Eighth was suffering losses of fifteen to twenty percent of its airborne force on a given day. Yet it is not hard to understand the British perspective on this, for Nazi bombs had fallen on English soil, and Spitfires were shot down in her skies. They must have scoffed at the American leadership's notion of discretionary bombing.[11]

I received a "V-mail" from Junior, dated July 13. He's fairly well contented over there, and he says that I shouldn't take much money, if they send me over there. He says that they are very good to him, and everyone tries to help him amuse himself. (7/27/44)

Junior (Bill Neilson Jr.) was an officer stationed in England with the Army Transportation Corps in the lead up to D-Day.

In the letter of July 27, George first made mention of V-mail. Short for "Victory Mail," V-mail was developed by Eastman Kodak and was the main way soldiers stationed abroad were able to communicate with friends and family back home. Previously, one of the only ways to reach loved ones was through airmail, which was often more expensive than surface mail and took too long to be used for any urgent messages. V-mail, essentially a photograph of a letter, allowed for faster, less expensive correspondence. Because the letters were censored before being transferred to microfilm, V-mail was one of the most secure methods of communication. After microfilm letters arrived at their destinations, the negatives would be blown up to full size and printed. In addition to increased security, this method meant saving shipping space that could otherwise be used for necessary war materials. It reduced the volume of thirty-seven mailbags to just one.[12]

I got a letter from Nebel. He is at San Angelo, Texas. He's in bombardiering training; and he'll get finished on September 23, "barring a recurrent mishap," as he says. He feels like he was born as a cadet, and he's getting very tired of it. He says that classwork + not what you do with the practice bombs is what counts the most in his work. (7/28/44a)

Inside those peaceful looking clouds is like an erupting volcano

Yesterday's flying mission was the longest one yet, 6 hrs. + 15 minutes. Believe me, I was plenty tired, for I flew most of the pre-dusk formation and all of the night flying, 'til we landed at 10 o'clock. The first part of the ride was a camera gunnery mission, so that the gunners had an opportunity to "shoot down" some P40s, by getting some 'shots' on their film. Then, we went on up to altitude, again, for the 4th time in 4 missions. It was a particularly tiring affair, because the lead ship saw fit to climb right towards the sun, all the time. We were in the rear of the formation where we were almost blinded by the sun + the reflection from silver paint on the other planes.

We flew around this tremendous thunderhead cloud that rose over the city of New Orleans like a mountain over the valley. These

"cumulonimbus" or thunderheads with their great anvil shaped tops are the largest, the tallest, the most beautiful, and yet the most ferocious of all clouds, if one should venture to fly through. Inside those peaceful looking clouds is like an erupting volcano. Throughout the evening, clouds + storms were building up all around the vicinity + lightning flashes blinded us temporarily. Finally, we landed in about a 40 mile/hr. gale, the kind that generally precedes a thunderstorm, a little excitement. We got down just before the storms swept across the field + closed down on us. The evening was further spiced when Kiefer got confused + insisted on landing at Keesler Field. I finally convinced him, before we got below 1000' that he was at the wrong field!

Well, this morning, I received a letter from my old friend, Lonstrup. You know, I believe he is the best man or friend I have met so far, in the army. He seems to have the right "dope" on everything! He went through Blytheville, in the A.T.C. program.

He told me that he now knows about the A.T.-9, having flown everything. "It is hotter than everything I've flown." He said that if I flew that in Advanced, I could fly any ship. He claims that those who fly B-17s + B-24s get away from the actual fundamentals of flying. I have a great deal of admiration for him! Since his home is in Wisconsin + because his job will keep him traveling, he gave me his home address, Union Grove, Wisconsin. He says he hopes to see me sometime. He's a great personality; he plays wonderfully on the piano + he's a sports lover.

Certainly the chief technical advancement of the war

I saw some confidential reports on Radar, this morning. Radar stands for "Radio Direction and Range Finding." By means of radar, they can bomb, shoot-at or tell enemy planes, without ever seeing anything. It is almost one of the wonders of the age + certainly the chief technical advancement of the war. Consequently, a B-29 could take off, if it had to, fly to its target, shoot at enemy opposition, drop its bombs + return, without the pilot or anybody ever looking out of the airplane. They can even tell enemy planes from our own, by means of reflected light waves! (7/28/44b)

The foregoing was marked "Sh-h-h-h! Confidential" by George.

In case you decide to land the plane in water

We did not fly, as scheduled, yesterday afternoon because inclement weather – thunderstorms – prevailed throughout the day. They always find something for you to do! They had different crews-at-a-time climbing in + out of planes in the maintenance hangars, practicing ditching + bail-out procedure. The object, of course, is so that everybody knows where to go in case the alarm bell rings to abandon ship. In the case of "ditching" in the ocean, the procedure is a bit more complicated, and it is assumed that the crew will have adequate time to prepare for the terrific shock of stopping short when the plane drops in the ocean at landing speed of 110 m.p.h. In case you decide to land the plane in water, each member of the crew, except the pilot + co-pilot, have a prescribed amount of pre-arrangement to accomplish. Each has a certain amount of "shiftable" equipment to throw overboard, before leaving his station, so that nobody gets hurt when the plane lands. Then, all but the pilot and co-pilot arrange themselves, in the radio-room (8 men), braced and cushioned with parachutes + anything available to soften the shock of a sudden stop. It is not uncommon for planes to be landed in the English Channel where they ran out of gas, returning from a prolonged mission. Ditching is relatively safe, except for the shock of landing. (8/1/44)

The Royal Navy had an effective air-sea rescue program that, over the course of the war, rescued from thirty-three to sixty-six percent of fliers that *went into the drink as they would say. The US Navy lacked such, but worked in cooperation with the British in recovering airmen.[13]
*Contemporary AAF expression for landing in water.

We got a little steak, little potatoes and little service for $1.50

So, we had to hang around until 9 o'clock before we got dismissed. When I left the hangar, I had the radio man, the engineer, one of the gunners with me, so I decided that they might like a milk shake at the

"snack bar." Those shakes are especially thick, and you should have seen their expressions! They hadn't had such a drink in the army. So, I was pleased to see that they thought I was human. I guess I got more of a kick out of it than they did, which was a whole lot.

Today, we had ground school all day. It was the same boring stuff except for an hour of Link, in which I learned another method of orientating myself by radio. Like the beam bracketing + radio compass methods, it is called the method of "aural null" (hear no signal). You use the loop antenna in the radio compass, to accomplish this. This loop antenna is enclosed in that streamlined device which you see beneath all planes. The object with this is to go towards the direction from which no signal is received on the radio, (aural null). It sounds complicated although it is really not so. Simply, when the loop points towards the station, you receive no signal. So, you maneuver the plane 'til you get no signal; then, you're headed home!

After P.T., this evening, I was convinced by a boy with a car that we should go to Gulfport for a steak dinner. Naturally, we were blessed we got a little steak, little potatoes + little service for $1.50. When that happens I have little enjoyment. I still can't swallow not getting your money's worth. (8/1/44)

One of George's pet peeves was small portions, particularly on ice-cream cones. It was a matter of clandestine amusement for my siblings and me when Dad carried on about small ice cream cones. One day after patronizing a popular ice cream establishment, I recall he had only three words to say, "Small, small, small."

The sergeant came through the barracks and turned our light on at 3:00 sharp

I passed last evening by watching a poor, colored U.S.O. camp show at a post theatre. Naturally, I stayed out until 10:00; so, I wouldn't have to stay in bed too long before 3:00 a.m. arrived + I had to get up + report for briefing + flying. (I forgot to mention that I went to confession on Saturday evening, too.)

Then, came the dawn! Or, rather before the dawn, for the sergeant came through the barracks + turned our light on at 3:00 sharp. After breakfast at 3:30, and briefing at 4:45, we were in the air at exactly 6:10. (8/6/44)

Our mission for today was a high altitude formation ride to Shreveport, Louisiana + return at 20,000 ft. However, we were to have a camera gunnery conflict at 7:30, at 8000 ft., over the field, except that the fighter pilots evidently didn't get up in time. So the 12 ships in formation continued to circle + gain altitude over the field. For the second consecutive time there was almost a complete "undercast" of billowy, white clouds, in several layers. It was very cold at altitude today + my feet nearly froze. (I didn't wear my heavy boots). Kiefer, whose wife is in town, did not feel too well, so I flew nearly all of the mission. Brother! I'm tired. As they say in this rebel country, "Oh, my achin' back." That's no kidding either, for I had to sit catty cornered + crook my neck in order to see the plane on whose wing we flew. Then, we had an oxygen leak + had to worry whether or not we had enough to last. I'm getting so that I really like to fly in formation. I could do it all day, if it wasn't so tiring!

A "surprise attack"

On the way back, we had to let down through the clouds, which is "some fun" when you're flying close to other planes, now I'll tell you. Anyway, as we got near Gulfport, the clouds became a series of isolated, billowy clouds. As we just churned along in our steady descent, what should dart right at us from a cloud but a formation of P-40s, a "surprise attack?" The boys rushed to their positions + shot them down with their camera-loaded guns. At least, we'll know when we see the pictures. It's quite a start to see some fighters come racing out of the clouds at you.

It seems to cost a mint to just eat + pay for laundry + necessities around here. I don't think my money will last this time, either. I assure you I don't spend anything unusual; but, I guess it all goes into milk-shakes + pop. (8/6/44)

George titled his letter of August 11, 1944, *My First Trip to New Orleans!* Only his visit to Rome the following summer rivals this in its vivid portrayal. It was the first time in a year and a half that he wrote of seeing something worth remembering beyond the world of the military. Although space will not allow the inclusion of all of George's vivid imageries of the Big Easy, a sampling may suffice.

Yes, we saw New Orleans night life, all the joints and all the revelry

I believe that one of the most interesting experiences of my life began at 8:00 when I stepped off the train in New Orleans, on Thursday evening. I think, too, that the 4 of us who went together were all unanimous in that same thought. For, every minute of our time, every step of our long hours of walking and everything we looked at brought us closer to an atmosphere that was entirely strange, exciting and by all means educational!

Ma, they have their bars so attractive with bottles of liquor + wine that after you've seen several, you become attracted + fascinated by their old, and rich-looking architecture. Later, I found out that artists come to New Orleans to paint pictures of wineries and barfronts just as artists paint pictures of the wharves at Salem + Rockport + Provincetown. For, both are as ramshackle and as historic. Yes, all we did as all most people who come to the French Quarter do is travel in + out of the taverns + wineries amidst lots of drunkenness, and wild actions. However, only 2 of the 4 of us were drinking anything. I'll have to admit that I became curious to look into these "dives" to see the way this world-renowned section operated. Yes, we saw New Orleans night life, all the joints + all the revelry + believed we had seen everything when we finished patrolling the streets at 2:00 a.m. But, we got an entirely new picture the next day!

Well, St. Louis Cathedral is located right in the midst of the Quarter! It is the oldest cathedral in the United States, built in 1794 by a French benefactor who is buried beneath its floors along with several bishops + one priest. It is Bishop Rummel's cathedral. I did not forget you Ma, + I lit a candle for your intentions, in front of the Blessed Virgin. I always get satisfaction from doing something like that. So, I can say that I lit a candle for you in America's oldest cathedral.

P.S. They still wonder why I don't drink. Every time I see someone drunk, I think less of the idea. That's what I tell them. (8/11/44)

Military service includes unique opportunities. The New Orleans adventure serves to illustrate that even with a war on, America lived … its culture, its history, and even its quirky ethnic enclaves. London, too, was a hotbed of youthful entertainment as fliers poured into the city on badly needed passes for R&R. The pubs around the American air base towns in East Anglia were jammed with fliers drowning their worries and their nightmarish memories of terror in the skies. Young women thronged these places too and not infrequently left later with servicemen for a night of transgression. The evils of war are far-reaching. For many of the fliers, a fatalistic outlook guided their lives. Knowing they might not live to marry and grow old, they wanted to enjoy life's pleasures as long as it lasted. The American military made little attempt to curtail the carousing. They recognized that the boys needed a release from their ghastly duties. Miller[14] shared a story that underscores this:

> Binge drinking increased and combat commanders continued to do little about it while officers at headquarters who did not fly in combat had almost no way of controlling those that did. After putting away a dozen drinks too many, a lieutenant from the *Hundredth began to make a scene in a swanky London hotel bar. When a staff officer from Pinetree ordered him to his room, the tipsy flier replied, "Colonel, yesterday at noon, I was over Berlin. Where in the hell were you?"

*The famous Bloody Hundredth Bombardment Group, which flew out of Station 139 at Thorpe Abbots near the North Sea coast of East Anglia, was known for its high rate of casualties and lost planes. Indeed its record seemed to suggest it was cursed, but it was also a breeding ground for heroes.[15] The legendary unit of

the Eighth AF flew 306 missions (8,630 sorties) from June 1943 to April 1944, in the days when a crewman's average number of missions was eleven before becoming a casualty. It lost 184 crews, 229 planes, and suffered 785 men KIA (killed in action) or MIA (missing in action) and 894 POW (prisoners of war).[16]

Well, they are apparently going to waken us progressively earlier when we are on the early schedule, for the sergeant pulled the electric lights on at 2:30, this morning. And, you know how the eyes feel when someone turns the light on in your room at that hour! It feels as if your lids were being burned + singed by the heat of the light. After wandering in a daze to the mess hall for the usual bacon + egg treatment, during which walks all the navigators hasten to demonstrate their knowledge of celestial bodies by pointing out the various constellations in the heavily starred Mississippi sky, we got into the air-conditioned briefing room at 4:00 for the impending ordeal of note-taking, etc. Well, we finally drew the choice mission of them all! We had a cross-country to Savannah, Georgia + return, 1000 miles in all.

We were back home for lunch, 1050 miles in 5 ½ hours

After taking off at 5:30, long before sunrise, we were over Mobile by the time we were at 7000' + on course. Then, Capt. Larkin "hitched up" the mechanical C-1 autopilot, and, nobody had to touch the controls for the next 5 hours, except, to turn knobs + make minor corrections in headings at the navigator's demand. For, the autopilot can hold altitude, airspeed and a compass heading far better than any human being.

From then on, it was simply a matter of lolling around + sleeping + watch [navigator] Lt. Zwicker "sweat it out" with his multitude of charts, almanacs, radios, sextants, octants, astro-compass, etc. He was the only one who had to do anything. For practice purposes, he never looked at the ground. He did radio navigation + dead-reckoning; and, we came right out over our destination each time. For a change, it was a beautiful day throughout Florida, southern Alabama + Georgia.

We passed over the city of Savannah at 8:20, after 2 hrs. 45 minutes in flight + got a good look at Hunter Field, where we might go for *P.O.E.

On the return flight, Kiefer + I "checked up" on the navigator + took a few fixes of our own, for practice purposes. We arrived back at Gulfport 11:35 + were in the mess hall at 12:15. So, we had gone across the South to the Atlantic coast + back, + now we were back home for lunch, 1050 miles in 5 ½ hours.

One of the crews which also went to Savannah today had a pilot who lived in Sylvester, Ga., a small village in the middle of nowhere. They said that they came down to 1000 feet + kept circling until the entire town came out + waved at them. I guess he got quite a thrill out of seeing all the folks waving at him. He said he would have buzzed the place, were it not for the latest rigid restrictions that are being imposed for flying infractions!

Tonight at the club, they have a free supper + dance – shrimp (br-r-r) aplenty, ham, celery, salads, fresh fruit, cake, etc., all on the house. What do you know about that? I guess their fat bank-roll bothers them at times. (8/16/44)

*Point of embarkation

This afternoon, we were scheduled for high-altitude bombing + camera bombing, when briefing first started. However, an abundance of clouds + electrical storms made it impractical for that work; and, they sent us on a cross-country to "Texarkana," right on the border of Texas + Arkansas. We had to fly through clouds + around thunderheads, climbing + descending all the while. It was rough + uncomfortable all the way. It was actually a flight to give us experience in weather conditions. It sure did! On the way back it got dark before we got near New Orleans + we had to finish the trip by flying through weather, at night + on instruments. Of course, the night part of it was part of the flight, but, it was made more miserable by the abundance of clouds near the ground. It was so bad that the navigator was unable to use the radio to determine his position + we had to return by "dead-reckoning," for the most part. Then, when we did arrive at the field, we had to fly around in circles while two thundershowers invaded the field. What a melee! Dodging planes + clouds + trying to see through rain, etc. Boy, I thought we'd never get down; but, we did, at 10:15! (8/20/44)

I never sweated any more in all my life

The main thing that we did today was shoot landings. There was an instructor-pilot in the left seat and I was in the right seat. We practiced some two + three engine procedures before making the landings. Now I want to tell you that I never sweated any more in all my life. I had to wipe my face with a cloth on two occasions, because the salt from my forehead got into my eyes. Actually, my flying suit and the parachute harness were dripping wet. You see, it is as hot from 1000 feet down as it is on this torrid Mississippi soil; so, when you're twisting that big fort around, you're really working. Anyhow, I made some fairly decent landings and made the instructor feel satisfied, and that is what counts. But, I sure worked + sweated like a bull for 2 solid hours. You see, we made running take-offs; and, we did not stop between landings. As soon as the plane would get squarely onto the runway, I'd give it the power, start the flaps coming up + take-off once more.

After that 2 hour session, we let the instructor out; and, I was just about ready for a good long drink of water, which, of course, was not on the plane. Then, we proceeded to accomplish the balance of our mission which was to bomb in Louisiana, from high altitude. However, there were too many clouds, as there usually are late in the afternoon, around here. In the meantime, + while we were deciding what to do, I got a chance to crawl back to the tail gunner's position + see what it was like to sit back there. Say, that's quite a place to be, but it's no wonder that the tail gunners always get sick! While I was back there, Lt. Dunn, bombardier, was up in my seat, wheeling the plane around a bit + getting some so-called "stick time." So, once again we were unable to complete our mission. But, night flying is rarely completed down in this "thunderstorm country." (8/24/44)

The post-war world is apt to be as upset as the war-torn world

Once more, the throes of midnight have overtaken me, before I have gotten around to commencing my daily accountability to you. This time, I'll be forced to blame the almost hour showing of "Dragon Seed" with Katherine Hepburn. It is a sequel to "The Good Earth," and the story was written by Pearl Buck. It is truly an educational picture of the highest

caliber; but, it is not one bit entertaining. Betty, you'd be interested in it, very much. It stirs your emotions + opens your eyes to what the Chinese people went through, in the face of the Japanese onslaught. It is modern + bold in its presentation of the love + association of young man + wife. It is very similar to the story of the Poles and their hardships, for the Chinese burned their century-old villages, as did the Poles, in order to starve + impair the advance of the Japs. It is full of tender stories of family separation + death amongst children + old folks alike. As far as I can see, the post-war world is apt to be as upset as the war-torn world, for quite some time, for hostilities can no more suppress inborn ideas of Japs + Germans than they can of the Chinese. Oh, well! Let's let that wait, shall we? (8/25/44)

In answer to Betty's query about the lights on airplanes, George explained that the lights on civilian aircraft are blinking whereas military plane lights are constant unless the pilot momentarily blinks them manually.

Also, Army planes have 3 lights on the bottom of the fuselage (red, yellow + clear), with which to send code messages to the field, in case the radio is inoperative. They are rarely used, though.

Today, I had a very new + good lesson in the Link, for I had a lesson in using the runway localizer + coming in for an instrument landing. Believe me, that would be the crowning achievement of my efforts in flying, to make a blind landing. It is like me drawing or playing Malequena like Annie Nigro! Anyhow, it involves the use of another instrument on the panel, in addition to another new procedure amongst the volumes of procedures that I've already come in contact with. It was quite a thrill to make a blind landing in the Link, even. After all, your course + times etc. are all plotted mechanically + in preparation to actual flight.

We were given charts of Southern England and France

In ground school this morning, we were given charts of Southern England + France, to become familiar with British signs coloring. In the afternoon, we had a lecture by a civilian, a district representative of the

B-17 Boeing Firm. He is on the field to observe maintenance problems and make surveys for the Boeing firm. With the propellers set to engine speed of 1400 r.p.m. + with 29" of manifold pressure, the B-17 can actually cruise at 140 m.p.h. for 12-14 hours. That is in case you get lost or have to use that setting to stretch gas while returning from a mission. The B-17 can be made to stay in the air for 16-18 hours, fully loaded + with 2780 gallons of gasoline. How's that. Boy, it's quite a device + there's plenty to be learned yet.

Ma, the inexhaustible inventory of charts, movies + information that they give us is almost unbelievable. This course is fast becoming one of the most instructive + all inclusive I have ever experienced. (8/25/44)

This has been a dull, listless weekend, with nothing but a little extra sleep to show for my efforts. Yesterday, I did see one of the B-29 "Superfortresses," which was parked on our ramp. I don't think that it looks impressively larger than the B-17, although it actually is. It is more beautiful + combines all the characteristics of the "Liberator," the "Havoc," + the "Fort." It's four 14 ft. propellers, with 4 blades on each, look like great Dutch windmills. It burns over 500 gallons of gas per hour in normal consumption, and it could stay in the air nearly 36 hours, under maximum cruise power settings. It is quite a contraption. They cost about ½ million each, on the production scale that they are now coming out on. So, figure it all out when 100 or so of them hit Japan. 100 planes mean 50 million dollars' worth of planes. Some war, eh what? (8/27/44)

What we did today ordinarily comes under the heading of "buzzing"

You couldn't believe it, but they gave us a low altitude flying mission this morning, for some reason or other. They gave us a clearance, all the ships, that is, to fly at between 500 ft. or 1000 ft. throughout Mississippi + Texas + Louisiana. It is very seldom that you get a chance to fly low, especially in a B-17. Only the "pea shooters" usually get to do that on strafing missions. What we did today ordinarily comes under the heading of "buzzing," now a courts-martial + dishonorable discharge offense. However, they gave us permission to do it under the heading of a "search" mission.

Now we had the time of our lives, flying over little towns in Mississippi, at little more than roof-top level. Every colored + white family seemed to run into their gravel roads to see what was going on, for we could almost see the expressions on their faces. Can you imagine a B-17 coming over the house, with only a few feet to spare from the roof? Why, that would arouse all of Medford. Yet, there were about 25 B-17s doing that very thing to every little hamlet in Mississippi. I'll bet we flew lower in the B-17 than Kennedy ever flew over Medford. (8/28/44)

So, the B-17 is becoming more + more of a familiar piece of apparatus to me, these days. We've got over 100 hours, here, and, we'll have probably more than 150 when we leave. This afternoon, after I peeled off my soaking clothes + found it not possible to sleep in the torrid heat, I went down to Gulfport + hopped into the pool at the Markham Hotel, along with Matthews.

There's a little more about Lt. Kiefer that I haven't mentioned. He's never had any parents, alive, + he brought himself up. So, he's made his own way all along. I get along with him, very well, by the way. He thinks I can fly formation better than him, which is true, because I enjoy it; and, he knows I can land it very well. (8/28/44)

Today was ground school day, and we had navigation + engineering lectures to take up the 6 hours. I also had my last scheduled hour of Link, this afternoon. Then, since no P.T. is scheduled for this week, I indulged in a little touch football game – the Yankee boys versus the Rebel lads. That type of a set-up is always good for some competition.

So, I ate a late supper + visited a G.I. dance, which is being held on the floor of one of the hangars, with "George Auld's Orchestra," supposedly some name band. (8/29/44)

We generally take-off in a fit of terror

This has been one of the long days, commencing with the sergeant's politely muffled whistle at 2:45 a.m.! Yet, as I sit down to compose these hieroglyphics at the improvised officer's club, my mind + body

feel completely rested + rejuvenated after 4 hours of sleep into which I exhaustedly fell upon returning from flying at 2:00 this afternoon.

We generally take-off in a fit of terror (somewhat as I used to leave the house when late for school), because of all the trouble that we experience in getting started, due to faulty maintenance on the field. There's always something wrong that works us up to a fever pitch, since we are supposed to meet our scheduled rendezvous points, regardless. Either they forgot to fill the auxiliary gas tanks, the oxygen is low, some instruments are faulty, or any other of a number of possibilities. But, that is not unusual, and it has intensified our consciousness of thoroughly checking the airplanes before flight! However, our miseries were augmented this morning, when we were unable to contact the tower for take-off instruction. None of the transmitters were operating, the command, nor the "V.H.F." (very high frequency). After some frantic cursing on Kiefer's part (because the lead plane on gunnery was trying to contact us), the radio man finally got through on his liaison transmitter, and we took off "like a scalded dog," but 1 hour late + too tardy for the gunnery mission. (8/30/44)

Too late for gunnery, we cruised about until it was time to climb up to 20,000 feet over the Hammond bombing range, in Louisiana. There, Lt. Dunn was scheduled to drop 10 bombs. So, at 9:00, we leveled off there, set up the "A.F.C.E." (Automatic Flight Control Electronic) and let Dunn become master of ceremonies, from his position in the nose. Today, all we had to do was sit there + watch Dunn waggle the plane around a square pattern to permit himself to make 4-5 second level runs on a target, on a 0o heading. It was cold, today, too. Because we had nothing to do, Kiefer + I got very chilly, despite our protective clothing. So, we sat there and heckled Dunn, told him to hurry up + kept needling him about hitting houses. Now, both of us had to take a violent visit to the *relief tube, midway during the target mission. But, since the bomb doors were open, it is not a safe practice to go into the bomb-bay, where the relief tube is located. So, we told Dunn that if he didn't hurry, he'd have to mop up the plane. Then once in a while, his visibility would be hindered by a cloud + he couldn't make a release. That simply prolonged our agony in the cockpit. Oh, Ma! You don't know what it is like at altitude, for, you can't control yourself quite as easily! But, we made it, even though Dunn

hurried his last release so fast that he never did see it hit! Theoretically, that bomb could have hit anywhere, within a 20 mile radius!

Ma, we're still wondering where the last bomb went

You should feel sorry for the people who live in Mississippi. You know, the bombs are armed for release at all times, while the bombardier circles his target, crossing towns + cities like Baton Rouge with the door open, etc. Every so often a bombardier misses part of his load + can't account for it. Then, there's the story of the fellow that accidentally hit his salvo switch over the city of Gulfport. Fortunately, the switch was out of repair, or else some havoc would have been created in Gulfport. Theoretically, there is no one supposed to be on the target area. Ma, we're still wondering where the last bomb went. It went through a cloud, probably some farmer's barn, to blow it up! Of course, Mobile, Baton Rouge + New Orleans are "bombed" regularly, with cameras, to give the bombardier aiming practice.

Well, tomorrow will be a glorious day, as is every last-of-the-month, with all the pleasures and comforts that are associated with Pay day! So, until then, I bid you adieu and good night. (8/30/44)

*The relief tube allowed the crewmen to urinate in flight, but it often became plugged with frozen excretion at high altitudes. A bucket served as a receptacle if a more serious bodily function was necessary. With the addition of vomit about the ship from airsick men, one can see that considerable policing of the aircraft was needed after a ten-hour combat mission. That was on the more fortunate sorties. On the others, body parts and the corpses of dead crewmen were included in the dreadful mire of the returning ships.

This afternoon, we took up a different subject, communications. This time, we had instructors who have all returned from combat + know the story completely. One hour was given over to code, which most of us have not had for some time. The other two hours were given over to a study in use of the command radio transmitter + the three command receiving sets. These are the sets that the pilot uses continually, although they represent merely one integral part of the intricate radio system of the

plane. Imagine, if you can, that the radios on the B-17 add up to a total worth of around $50,000. By that, you can see how much a part radio plays in controlling the safe operation of bombers. (8/31/44)

As part of this ongoing letter-flight manual, George listed the seven radios employed on the plane and their uses as well as the two antennae, one fixed and one rotating on the plane's exterior.

I received your letter with the *helicopter clipping, today. I wouldn't be too optimistic about its possibilities, because it still lies in the realm of an experienced operator; and, it is further from public use than most people visualize.

By the way, they use between 20 + 25 tank cars of gasoline daily on this field, in case you are interested in gasoline usage. That amounts to about 125,000 gallons of gasoline.

Tomorrow, we arise at the ripe hour of 2:45; so, I'll close now, with all my love, from George. (8/31/44).

*The first viable mass-produced American helicopter, the Sikorsky VS-300, began production in 1942.[17]

We got our new navigator this weekend, finally. His name is Kendall Foster, and he's from Milton, Mass. So, that makes two Boston boys on the crew. Saturday was ground school day, and in the morning we had our final test on the 60 hours of instruction on the engineering end of the B-17! The hardest things to remember are the currents + voltages of the various d.c. + a.c. electrical circuits, where the fuses for the various auxiliary motors are (retracting, bomb doors, etc.), the efficiency figures for the various power settings, etc.

Saturday evening, the weather grew too hot for words. It was like a nightmare, it was so hot. But, we got cooled off by going to hi-altitude + the air-to-air gunnery range over the gulf. At long last, the boys got a chance to fire their guns, at high altitude. Then, we flew on instruments for the rest of the morning, because Kiefer will be getting a check-ride very soon, to determine his proficiency! We also gave the tail gunner + one of the waist gunners a chance at the wheel. They got a big kick out of

trying to hold the plane straight + level, which to a novice is always quite a trick!

By the way, to disprove how much everybody is anxious to fight for their country, I might add that about 75 men have quit or sought elimination in our class. That's 75 men out of 56 crews, 75 out of 560 men. That's 1/8 of the men. Most of them are enlisted men, with a few navigators + bombardiers thrown in. (9/3/44)

As disaster seemed inevitable, he must have been still going 100 m.p.h.

Back here once more after a brand new experience that did not simply end with our spending the night in Greenville [South Carolina]; for, while we were waiting for those *#*!?! civilian mechanics to finish our airplane, I saw a weird sight, one of the closest to disaster I've ever seen; yet, I'll mention it because nobody was seriously hurt, miraculously!

I may have mentioned that the runways at Greenville run up + downhill, strangely enough. Well, our plane was parked beside one of the runways, which was not being used because of the wind direction. Then, we saw the fire truck, crash truck + "meat wagon" move into crash landing position. Soon, a B-25 (that's twin engine, you know), loomed into sight. One of his engines was out + he was on a single engine procedure for landing. He seemed to be coming terrifically fast as he wait[ed] 'til the last second to lower his wheels, as is proper when on single engine in a twin-engine plane. However, he was dragging it in instead of dropping it in, as he should have. He was landing downhill + downwind + he seemed so intent + excited upon keeping his plane straight with full power on the good engine that he must have forgotten his airspeed; for he was going at express train clip, about 200 m.p.h. He tried to put it down on the runway, but, the airspeed wouldn't let it stay down + it ballooned up again. Everybody saw that he was using up too much runway too fast. Then, he bounced again! This time, he became desperate + nosed it down, straight for the concrete. It's a wonder the plane did not cartwheel, then. But, she simply shuddered + buckled + bounced again. The fellow still had not cut his good engine + he was approaching the end of the 1 ¼ mile strip, but fast. He had long since determined not to try to pull-up +

go around on one engine. He was going to stay on the ground at any cost. As disaster seemed inevitable, he must have been still going 100 m.p.h. when he applied full brakes. What a sight that was. The plane cowered on its haunches like a mad dog + great sheets of fire + smoke came from his wheels as he risked cartwheeling from a tire blow-out to brake his plane. But, all was in vain, he shot over the end of the runway + off a 40 ft. cliff, out of our view. All we saw was a great puff of dust + we anxiously awaited the burst of smoke which seemed inevitable. But, thank God, it didn't. The plane was completely demolished, one brand new B-25 "Billy Mitchell." Yet, the entire crew of 6 were able to walk away.

If you could have seen that shrieking, tire-burning plane disappear over that cliff, you'd have been horror-stricken. I understand that the pilot + co-pilot were in the air one hour afterward!

Well, we got our plane serviced and took off uphill + between two large hills at about 12:30, although two of our engines were not pulling maximum horsepower. We were 3 hours en route, dodging thunderheads in a cold front, etc. We passed over Maxwell Field + Montgomery (the dear place), en route. When we got back, Kiefer was questioned by 3 captains, who said, "Whenever you're in doubt, set it down!" That, we did. So, we had a real new experience in this great, wild game! (9/6/44)

As the weeks of September passed, Lt. Neilson began to focus quite a bit on the arrangements for his overseas transit. Some of the crews were flying their own planes overseas. George wanted badly to fly to the combat theater. Rumors circulated. The alternative to flying was to take a troop ship. Between September 6 and September 21, the crew flew seven missions, mostly local gunnery runs over the gulf, and one to Birmingham, Alabama. Faulty equipment and weather continued to vex the crew as they struggled to complete the required hours for combat crew training.

Well, the last day of summer + the first day of fall have passed since I wrote to you last. Both of them were sweltering hot, just about as hot as it has been all summer; and, I've just about lived in a pool of sweat + itchy, soaking clothes, as I generally do in this never-ending siege of heat. I have been on 3 separate flights in the past 24 hours, in an attempt to complete

our requirements so that we could increase our possibilities of getting a 3-day pass. It was almost all in vain, however, because our efforts were impaired by our usual twin nemeses: weather + faulty equipment.

The lightening lit them up like a Polish church

The mission was scheduled as a cross-country to Dallas. As we took off, we could see the endless line of thunderstorms directly on our course. We could see them plainly because the lightening lit them up like a Polish church + and the bit of light from a first-quarter moon reflected on those that had not reached the violent stage. So, there we were in an awry night, climbing on course to Dallas.

The first thing we had to do was find a "saddle back" or a hole in the "soup" which was lined up like a stone wall between New Orleans + Baton Rouge (+ even further north). There was no way to get around the front, so we climbed for a weak spot + finally started "sweating out" a foggy spot which didn't appear to be violent. To make a long story short, we finally got into the clear, over in Alexandria, Louisiana + proceeded on our merry way to Dallas. Then, we set up the auto pilot + proceeded across the dark, oil-well dotted stretches of Texas. We arrived over the brightly lighted city of Dallas at 10:45, just as the navigator had figured. (9/22/44)

After reaching Dallas, the crew "wheeled around and started through the inky blackness (moon having set at 9:00), for home." Once back in Louisiana, the line of thunderstorms confronted the plane again. Radioing in, the crew was instructed to land at Alexandria AAFB. (2nd Air Force), as another plane that experienced trouble had also done. The next morning, it was "clear sailing across the uninhabited bayou regions of Louisiana and the Mississippi River valley." They landed in Gulfport at 11:00. After a milk shake, they were in the air again at 1:00 for a gunnery mission. But when they arrived at the course, none of the cameras were working.

So, we landed at 3:00, again, tired, discouraged, hot + in a generally weary condition.

You know, everyone is pretty-well upset, around here, especially. The boys have had no leave for a long time. Not even a chance for a pass looks possible now! It appears that with all the incomplete missions, we'll be flying until the last gun is fired at Gulfport, anyhow! By the way, I've got over 200 hrs. in the B-17, now counting Tyndall Field's training. (9/22/44)

The last day Lt. Neilson flew stateside was September 23, when he flew a low-altitude bombing exercise. After that, the primary business at hand was his crew's transit overseas. All the while, the men were not informed where they were going or how they would get there until the last possible moment. Obviously this was for their safety. German Intelligence was very active in the United States, and the wrong information in the wrong ears could lead to catastrophe. So, this process was agonizing for George, who desperately wanted to tell Ma where he was going and what he was doing.

It was simply a case of buying enough liquor to get all the boys drunk

The other main occurrence today was the prearranged party that we scheduled for the enlisted men. Naturally, it wasn't of much significance to me. It was simply a case of buying enough liquor to get all the boys drunk. That was Kiefer's idea! Each one of the officers "chipped-in" in equal amount. The other 3 bought a quart of whiskey apiece + I paid for a room at the Edgewater Gulf Hotel! So, at 8:00 p.m., all 10 of the boys crowded into one little hotel room + there was also Jones's (the radioman's) wife along. It didn't take them long to finish off all the drink, as it was completely vanished at 10:00. So, Kiefer wisely ushered them all out + down stairs to catch a bus home! None of them was badly off; but, they were all pretty happy, which was the object. As for me, it was a waste of time + money in my opinion! But, what are you going to do? 9/10 of the fellows drink, so they all wanted to have such a party. Naturally, I had

to contribute my share and say nothing, as if money doesn't disappear like water around here, anyhow! But, that's how it goes, you know. Even though you don't drink, you're expected to contribute to the proceedings or be thought of as a piker, I suppose. (9/25/44)

As for the candy + fruit, Kiefer + I finished the apples, but, the candy will last for quite a while. I didn't eat any of it. I always like to think of a gift from home as something precious, almost sacred; because, that's the way it always affects me. I can't help but look at it + say, "That was thought up + prepared by my thoughtful mother." That makes me enjoy + appreciate it all the more.

As for the processing, that took a major part of the day. It included a dental survey, an abbreviated medical (for a change) and a thorough check of all our records. That will all be repeated once again at the staging area, I imagine.

Oh yes, they had an airplane land with one wheel up, today. Nobody was hurt or anything, but the airplane was badly damaged. (9/26/44)

I could be going anywhere!

We put our bags on the trucks this afternoon, in readiness for the big trek to Savannah, on the morrow. We'll leave at 9:30 a.m.; so, I expect to be in Savannah by Saturday noon. Word received from the last group that went to Hunter Field indicates that they were there for merely 42 hours, before they were processed + given their planes + took off! On the other hand, we might be there for 42 days + then go by boat! So, there you have it! As is usually the case, the army makes you very indefinite about what's going to happen next! All I can say is that if you see my summer clothes in the footlocker when it comes home, I've undoubtedly gone to England. Otherwise, I could be going anywhere! (9/28/44)

The next morning, George boarded a train for Savannah on the first leg of the long journey to the war torn continent of Europe. For the young officer, it was a climactic moment of the past twenty months. All the work, the harassment and discomfort, untold hours of ground instruction, hundreds of hours of flying,

and a plethora of other experiences were invested in preparing for what was to come on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. It is perhaps true that no one is ever really ready to go to war for the first time, to be placed in harm's way before a ruthless and unrelenting enemy. Hundreds of thousands of the boys that preceded George in entering that war were, by the fall of 1944, prisoners of war, wounded in action, missing, or dead. Just five years earlier, Germany had the most powerful armed forces in the world. In just three years, they waged a ruinous war of conquest and international plunder that engulfed a continent. Though the tide of the war had slowly and at a great price turned in favor of the Allied forces, the German Wehrmacht and Luftwaffe were far from defeated. Nearly every day, Allied planes were carrying brave young men to their deaths or captivity as the Nazi fatherland and its accomplices fiercely defended their dwindling resources.

Even though every soldier's experience was unique, in a sense George represented millions of his countrymen who ventured into the crucible of war in some of the blackest years in the world's history. The experience would grow these men up overnight, remake them in ways they never could have imagined or planned. The days to come would change the rest of their lives. And many of those brilliant lives, so full of the hopes, dreams, and loves, would be snuffed out in an instant in the brutal and senseless chaos of man's most inhumane of all institutions. Others would suffer from cruel wounds for the rest of their lives, while the fate of so many would never be known.

Chapter 14

Shipment Overseas

Gulfport, Mississippi to Foggia, Italy

The Encirclement of Germany: Air, Ground, and Underground

In a mechanized war, success depends upon the belligerent's ability to move men, armaments, and supplies rapidly and flexibly to where they are needed as the various fronts wax and wane. Thus, rail marshaling yards became increasingly important bombing targets in the strategic bombing campaign. Two things had become clear, contrary to the optimistic ideas of prewar air power visionaries. First, it would be a long, gut-wrenching task that would require many missions to the same targets. Second, such missions would take the bomber fleets to targets adjacent to large urban population centers and result in collateral destruction of residential areas and civilian deaths.[1]

British Bomber Command had few scruples about civilian bombing, understandably, as Great Britain had lived under the rain of the Luftwaffe's terrifying bombing raids. The Americans, in contrast, found residential bombing distasteful.[2] The American "bomber boys" did not hate the German population nearly to the extent that their animosity was directed against the criminal leaders of the Nazi regime. This was so despite the fact that it was known that such a regime could not have flourished without widespread support from its citizens. As the war progressed and desperation ruled, leaders became hardened as the casualty lists multiplied. The fight became personal to those who lost their friends in battle. The morality of strategy gradually took a backseat to expediency. The fliers came to see their work as ugly but necessary. To be sure, bombing civilian population centers took a psychological toll on the men.[3]

Having by all realistic calculations lost the war on D-Day, the German government placed its hopes increasingly in single, fantastic counteroffensives and secret weapons of mass destruction to reverse its fortunes.[4] It hoped that the Allies would negotiate a separate peace that would allow it to turn all of its resources to hold off the Red Army, which was rapidly advancing on the eastern front. In the waning days of the Third Reich, some Nazi leaders believed they could persuade the Western Allies to join them in the fight against Bolshevism.[5] Of course these were fantasies because, as agreed upon at Casablanca and Yalta, the Allies would accept nothing short of the unconditional surrender of Germany.

The Luftwaffe lost an average of three hundred planes per week in the summer of 1944. Despite the steady attrition of planes and pilots and deepening fuel shortages, the Luftwaffe continued to flex sporadic muscle. Nazi fighter chief Adolf Galland, in an effort to reverse the air game, assembled special groups of heavily armed two-engine planes in "Sturmstaffeln" (Storm Groups) to attack the bomber formations. The "Sturmbock" (battering ram), an armor modified FW190 with five fearsome guns, known as the *flying tank,* was virtually indestructible.

On September 27, 1944, twenty-five B-24s of the 445th Liberator Group were turned to splinters in six minutes over the German city of Goettingen. The slaughter was so fast that crews began bailing out before they were attacked. Twenty-five Liberators were obliterated in six minutes. The entire fleet was saved only when Mustangs arrived to shorten the disaster. The crews that landed at Tibenham were so shaken that they were unable to speak of it. Later, Allied strategists figured out how to deal with the Storm Groups, and the threat passed.[6]

Another menace reared its head when significant numbers of the new Me262 jets began harassing the bomber groups. So swift was this new miracle weapon that, were it not for Hitler's insane intervention, it might have changed the direction of the war. The German fuehrer ordered the aero jet technology to be used exclusively for bomber aircraft, diverting the Me262 from fighter

command. Galland defied this ridiculous order at great personal peril. Mustangs, exploiting the jets' slow speed on landing, waited until they began to let down, dove from high altitude, and took them out. This threat then was also significantly neutralized. Large numbers of the wonder planes never flew for lack of fuel and trained pilots. Later Galland was stripped of command as disloyal. He had never joined the Nazi Party.[7]

German aircraft production continued strongly, a fact attributed to Nazi armaments minister Albert Speer's ingenious plan to disperse aircraft manufacturing facilities. But lacking sufficient fuel and pilots, it was too late to make a difference.[8]

With Allied armies stalled on the Siegfried line in September 1944 a bold operation was hatched to break the stalemate and move on the German fatherland. Large numbers of British paratroopers were dropped behind German lines in Holland with the mission to enter Germany along the Dutch border and drive to the heavily industrialized Ruhr District to the east of the Rhine. The breakthrough attempt, known by the code name "Market Garden," was a dismal failure. It was not until October when the first German city, Aachen on the Dutch border, fell to the Allies. The response by the Committee on Strategic Targets in Washington to the slow progress of the ground armies was for intensified attacks on oil and rail targets.[9]

Though official policy placed oil as the top priority after D-Day, bad weather forced the hand of the Allies to bomb transportation centers, which required less precision bombing. In the fall air campaigns, bombing focused on the Ruhr District. Located in the present German state of Northrhine-Westfalia, the industrialized region along the Ruhr River basin was and still is one of the most populous regions in Europe. Some thirty large cities form a nearly continuous urban megalopolis that is the heart of German heavy industry, especially steel and armaments. This smokestack plain was the home of the Krupp conglomerate, Germany's largest armaments producer. The region thrived on the rich coal resources under its soil.[10]

Operation Bagration

To understand the complete picture of the European war, one must take the eastern front into consideration. Having repelled the Wehrmacht at Moscow, Kiev, and Stalingrad, the Soviets began to slowly push the German armies out of the country. Roughly coordinated with the D-Day invasion at Normandy, the largest Allied ground operation of World War II actually took place in the western Soviet republic of Belorussia. This campaign, launched in June 1944, intended to force Germany to fight in two major fronts simultaneously. It was aimed at forty German divisions of Army Group Center, one of three major troop alignments in the USSR. Known as Operation Bagration, the largest tank battle in history, the Soviets quickly overran the battle-weary Germans, driving their armies out of Belorussia and Eastern Poland. The Germans lost 350,000 men, including thirty-one generals killed or taken prisoner. It was a major Soviet victory from which Germany would never recover.

By August, the German armies were finally driven out of the Soviet Union, and the fight moved into Poland. Hitler's Europe was being squeezed from all directions. It was only a matter of time before the war would visit the German homeland on the ground. Without the relentless air onslaught, the ground advances would not have occurred with the success with which they did, particularly in the west. In the east, the proletarian Red Army with its masses of peasant soldiers fought valiantly for the motherland. In the Soviet Union, which bore the greatest brunt of the war in terms of civilian and military casualties, the war with Nazi Germany is known in history as the Great Patriotic War. It defined international politics in Eastern Europe and was a focal point of Soviet identity for decades after the war.[11]

SHIPMENT OVERSEAS

By the first of October, our crew was pretty well trained and integrated, and familiar with the operation of the B-17. So, the time

came for another train ride. This time, as was frequently the case in training, they did not tell us where we were headed, except that we knew that we were going overseas. It turned out that we headed for Newport News, Virginia, the largest U.S. Naval Center and the base from which many troops were shipped overseas. Incidentally, some of the crews were assigned to fly their own airplanes overseas, from the P.O.E., Points of Embarkation locations. When they flew to southern Europe, they flew to Ascension Island, on to Marrakech, Africa and then along to Italy, etc. The planes going to England and northern Europe went by way of Goose Bay, Labrador, Iceland and on to England.

After three days at Newport News, we were loaded onto a troop transport, the Athos II, which was under the Greek flag. While our crew was together, on the same ship, we were nevertheless separated, on the ship, as between officers and enlisted men; so it was a 14 day "cruise" across the Atlantic, through the Straits of Gibraltar, the 14 mile strip of water that separates Morocco from Spain, then on into Naples. Conditions were crowded; and we slept in 3-tier bunks. We ate two meals a day and were fed at any time the mess halls (galley, on a ship) were ready to serve: 2:00 a.m. for breakfast and, possibly 2:00 p.m. for dinner. Our ship traveled by convoy with other transport and supply ships, escorted by U.S. Navy destroyers, which roamed back and forth in front of and behind us. Otherwise, the trip was uneventful, and we met other people from ground forces, etc. who were aboard this same ship.

Despite all the changes of bases and the inconveniences of train trips, plus the boat trip, I always managed to write a letter home, each day, reciting "highlights" of the events of each day, even if some of the events were not necessarily very "high."

In late October, the Athos II docked at the port of Naples, in the south of Italy. "Docked" actually involved pulling up alongside of a couple of ships that were turned on their sides as a result of the fighting that took place when our 5th Army invaded Italy, at Anzio, from North Africa in 1943. The Bay of Naples is, normally, a very scenic port, surrounded by pretty, high hills, with a backdrop of

the famous volcano Mt. Vesuvius, 15 miles to the east and south of the city.

A wide variety of military personnel disembarked from the Athos II. The Air Corps contingent was transported by truck to the nearby headquarters of the Allied Forces in southern Europe, at suburban Caserta.

NAPLES, ITALY TO FOGGIA, OCTOBER, 1944

Then came another train ride, this one even more "distinctive" and memorable. For we were loaded into "box cars" for transport to our ultimate destination, Foggia, a well bombed-out farm center in East Central Italy. Foggia, as you see it on the map, lies just under the "spur" of Italy, as you see it depicted as a boot. These box-cars were old, WWI vintage, smelly and decrepit. But, of course, we were now in Italy and things were bound to be different. With our crew now assembled together, we were packed into these cars much as you expect to see prisoners of war travelling. Naturally, there were no seats. We each had all of our belongings, including duffle-bags, foot-lockers, etc. As we left Caserta, the personnel responsible for our movement were "kind" enough to supply us with "K" rations, the basic on-the-move meals for military personnel in the field. Then the old "choo-choo" type engine started up and puffed its dirty soot and smoke into the open box-car doors as we started towards Foggia. Bear in mind that this move was no different than most moves we made in that it was never made clear where we were headed. So, now in a foreign country, the inherent wonderment and insecurity was all the more, on this trip, since we knew that whatever the destination, we would be going closer to the war zone.

Recalling that as we were being trained, we were regularly reminded that as we completed our training and were commissioned as officers, we should act like and be treated as "officers and gentlemen." The ride from Naples to Foggia was about as depressing as any ride you could imagine. Thus, our conditions and personal demeanor caused us to act and look more like prisoners of war than

"officers and gentlemen." The trip to Foggia was 65 miles, and it took 12 hours on the rickety Italian train.

Upon arrival at Foggia, we were picked up by trucks, which took us to our assigned units, in the farm fields of "greater" Foggia. At this point, there were 50 crews, 500 men, being "delivered" to their new unit organizations.

Foggia was a trading center for an extensive farm belt. All the homes were of the same size and description: white, bungalow-type buildings with orange trim. They all looked exactly alike, scattered across the landscape in locations to stand guard over the property of the farmers who worked the land. We were told that the farm houses were all part of a government subsidy program to stimulate farms and the poor southern Italy rural economy. Also, the animals seemed to live in with the people, as evidenced by the houses that were not taken over for military use as headquarter buildings for the bomber and fighter squadrons and groups stationed in the area. All the Air Corps units of Southern Europe, in the strategic bomber command were part of the 15th Air Force, including those in the Foggia area. The 15th Air Force consisted of 6 groups, sometimes called Wings of B-24s and 1 wing of B-17s.

Our crew was assigned to the 97th Bomb Group, on Manfredonia Rd, which road led to the town of Manfredonia, on the Adriatic Coast, directly under the "spur" of Italy. Most of the outfits around us were strategic bombers; but, there were also fighter groups nearby. Their mission was to fly escort of the heavy "strategic" bombers. One of the fighter groups was the famous [3]32nd Fighter [Group], stationed at *[Ramitelli], made up exclusively of the first, and only Negro (later to be called "Black") pilots. (G.H.N., 1991)[12]
*George's original manuscript gave the unit as the 32nd Fighter Wing at Cerignoli air base, but in fact is was the *332nd* Fighter *Group* based at *Ramitelli AB*.[13]

I entered the card-playing spirit

Well, we rode by Pullman from Gulfport to Savannah from 11:00 on Friday 'til 12:30 today, 25 ½ hours to make a trip that would take 2 ½

or 3 hours by air! How about that?! Anyhow, I suppose we can be satisfied that we had Pullmans + not chair cars. They even had the Pullman porters to take care of us! However we did have a taste of "G.I." atmosphere, because we had to eat food prepared in a G.I. kitchen car.

Finally, after all the many miles I've ridden on the railroads, I've seen the light, as far as making the time pass less boringly! So, I entered the card-playing spirit, which I'd never done before, on the trains. Of course, I couldn't sleep, Pullman or no Pullman; so the night passed rather slow; but, then my experience on Pullmans is limited to 3 nights, so far!

Be that as it may, we landed at Hunter at noon + were promptly quartered, showered, + had our clothes changed. At 3 o'clock, we attended a meeting in which the things we'll do at this station were outlined. The same old "processing" that is called for at every station you attend prior to going overseas; but, we'll get our permanent issue of flying clothes in addition.

We have nothing to do tomorrow, Sunday, + we're not scheduled to go through the "rigamorol" until Monday morning! I can't see how we'll be out of here before 5 or 6 days. However, they promised us that we wouldn't be here very long! They couldn't give us any clues as to whether we'd go by boat or plane! They told us that we have a 50-50 chance of going either way. (9/30/44)

It is just another big "army town," crowded to the hilt with soldiers

It is like old home week around here. I met a boy who went all through with me + is now stationed at Chatham Field, on the other side of Savannah, On B-24s. I met another fellow who told me about an accident that happened at Walnut Ridge, a month after I was there! One of the captains in charge of flying, who had always made himself distasteful to the boys, allowed night flying to take place on a night when threatening weather existed! The result was that the weather got bad + one boy got killed before they could get all the planes in! The captain was sent to P.O.E. + shipped to combat, within a week.

You see, crews of B-25s, B-26, A-20, + B-17s all come here for final staging + shipment, so there's probably other fellows here with whom I spent some of the training.

There wasn't anything scheduled for us today, so, I took advantage of the opportunity to see the first football game I'd seen in two years! It was a much publicized game between a select bunch of players called the "3rd Air Force Gremlins" + a team from nearby Chatham Field. It was held at Grayson Stadium in Savannah, where many southern college games are played. It is just another big "army town," crowded to the hilt with soldiers. It is fed by Hunter Field, Chatham Field, Liberty Field + Camp Stewart (one of the largest infantry camps in the country). They have all the brand-new airplanes on this field, at all times. They simply come here from the factory + go to the combat theatre. (10/1/44)

The Industrial Front

In a very real sense, World War II was fought as much on the factory floor as on the battlefield. Rosie the Riveter was the legendary woman who shed her role as a homemaker to fill badly needed spots in the factories of America's armaments and other industries. There were hundreds of thousands of Rosies. As effective as was Hitler's Germany in replacing the planes shot up by the Allied air forces, the resources of the Third Reich were ultimately unable to keep up with attrition. In contrast, America's continental industrial base, unfettered by bombs, demonstrated an almost unlimited capacity to replace the tools of war.

The US military underestimated the technical sophistication of Japan, but German technology and engineering was well respected in America. In fact, German immigrants played a significant role in the development of successful weapons. The quintessential example was Albert Einstein, the German-born physicist whose ideas on atomic energy led to the creation of the atomic bomb.[14] The P-51 Mustang, the darling of America's fighter squadrons, was based largely on a design by German immigrant Edgar Schmued.

Many civilian industries were retrofitted to produce war material. Auto manufacturing plants in Detroit turned to aircraft and tanks. Although these plants were not well adapted to the

tolerances required by the aircraft industry, they knew how to turn out machines, fast. B-17s were notorious for leaking oil, as a result of lower technical standards in the auto industry. Expediency required some compromises, so this continued. In a real sense, the American workshop defeated the Nazis by turning out more and better weaponry than her foe.[15]

They gave out 24 hour passes to 1/3 of the boys today: we gave the privilege to 3 enlisted men, because nobody else wanted one. By the way, they gave everyone on the crew a pair of glasses. So, you can easily see why there's a shortage of glasses in civilian life.

It is cool around here, just like it is at home at this time of year. So, it's not so bad, hanging around. We're all getting a good rest from flying but, it's awfully boring on this barren, strictly "G.I." post. (10/2/44)

A few words or phrases were removed with a razor blade from the following letters. George had warned Ma that if he sent letters from Hunter Field, they might be censored.

Frankly there isn't much that I can mention

Frankly there isn't much that I can mention without divulging the information that they don't seem to want about [censored] gathered here, etc. They have had us going through the gas chamber, to try our new type masks, (which we'll never wear on the other side, in our work). Then, we've had a few lectures on [censored]. The balance of the time has been spent on games of "hearts." We play hearts in the barracks, at the officer's club, and any place that happens to be convenient, just to pass the time which would drive an ordinary man crazy around here! We expect to be around for the better part of another week, anyways. So, you won't know when I go, until you stop getting letters.

That extra pay is for something rendered out of a man's hide

Everybody has been busy during the past few days, marking all their clothing in big black letters, in every conceivable place. Other than that

[most of] us have nothing to do but mope around the barracks + read the funny papers. They are treating our outfit pretty poor, around here. The enlisted men are pulling K.P., which would never be done to combat crews by the Air Corps. However, we are in the hands of the so-called "Walkie-Talkies" "paddle-feet," you know men who have never been in the service more than 6 or 8 months + then only for limited duties such as desk jobs. They let their jealousy of the Air Corps turn into a hatred of the outfit. They like to claim that the Air Corps is sloppy + undisciplined. That is entirely true, on the ground. But, they can't realize what is expected of even the least of the enlisted men in the air, not to mention the pilots. They think that the fliers are getting more pay + therefore putting one over on the ground forces. All they need do is reason that the gov't is giving nothing away + that extra pay is for something rendered out of a man's hide.

Already, I'm getting lonesome for mail; but, don't bother to write. The A.P.O. number which you now have will last for a few months, at least. (10/8/44)

Well, I went through that so-called "overseas processing" wherein they check all your clothing + belongings + give you a physical check-up, for the 5th + last time since I left Blytheville! What a mess. They make us drag all our trunks + bags over to a show-down room + they make certain we have all our equipment, etc. Yes, and I had another dental check. Since they found nothing wrong, I guess that they're all fixed up.

The upshot of it all, today, was that they issued each of us a bag full of flying equipment, permanent issue! It's all the latest + most elaborate of winter + summer flying clothes. They gave us a big bag to carry it in, also. They have a new type oxygen mask, which has a built-in microphone, thereby doing away with the throat microphone. They also gave us a "jungle kit," with a knife, mosquito netting, mosquito gloves + a quantity of antiseptic to guard against snake infections, etc. You can draw your own conclusions as to where we might go, for, they haven't told us, yet. However, the issue of a jungle kit would seem to indicate warmer climates. At the same time, they insisted that we have our long-handled underwear! So, there you have it!

We are going by boat

Now, then, they marked the trunk, the B-4 bag + the new bag that they issued, all with the shipping number that keeps your equipment from being separated from you. All of that can be summed up to the fact that we are going by boat! Yes, that is very definite! About 50% of the crews get to ferry the new planes across, while the rest go by boat! So, that appears to include us. So, it stands tonight, all we're waiting for is to find out when we leave, how many, when, where, etc. It's no secret, it's just that nobody knows.

Another thing, we draw side arms (.45 pistols) when we leave here. You can see all the boys strolling around just as they used to when they played cops + robbers! These pistols are worn from a strap that goes over the shoulder + under the arm. (10/9/44)

The next letter, written on Tuesday, October 10, 1944, was the last letter George sent from his homeland before the overseas journey.

Well, here's the latest news that I have! We board a train for Virginia, tomorrow afternoon (Wednesday) at 3:00. That'll put us in Newport News, or some other of those ports in Virginia, sometime on Thursday morning. From then on, your guess is as good as mine, as to where we are going. (10/10/44)

Among other items George was sending home, he mentioned a manual about the B-17, asking Ma and Betty to look it over "and decide for yourself how complicated it is." He qualified it with this statement:

It's okay for anyone to see, but don't leave it where strangers who come into the house could notice it! The B.U. magazine is the one which contains the article that I wrote for the Mercury!

The chief rumors have us going to Italy

Well, the chief rumors have us going to Italy or the Mediterranean. Let's see how close they are! As best we can determine, we'll probably not go to England. 5 crews of B-25s went to the South Pacific today. The way it works on B-17s is that those who come on alternate days seem to be flying.

Here's a list of what they issued us: so you can have a general idea about it.

1. A summer flying coveralls gabardine wool.
2. Wool-lined parka, winter shirt + pants to match. They take the place of the old sheep-lined leather suits that are so bulky. Yes, it has a chinchilla-like fur collar on it too! It's as smooth as a teddy bear.
3. Three pairs of gloves to fit into flying leather gloves
    a. One silk
    b. One cotton
    c. One knitted wool
4. One pair sheep-lined leather boots
5. Two flying helmets with built-in earphones that make them look like a football head gear.
6. One oxygen mask
7. One pair flying goggles with 5 different lenses, for different types of conditions (still no Ray-bans that I've been looking for)
8. One flashlight
9. One musette bag (like Junior had)
10. Canteen, mess-kit, etc.
11. Mosquito netting, gloves, repellent
12. One service model .45 caliber pistol with shoulder holster

I got a letter from Barbara forwarded from Mississippi today. It was filled with nice words about her thinking about me, etc. It certainly is nice to have her to write to anyway. Oh well, it looks good on paper + that's all that matters. (10/10/44)

George had only met the young lady on a leave earlier in the year. This predominantly pen-pal relationship gave young Neilson something better than war to hope for, a need that was the common lot of soldiers going off to war.

I had my picture taken in civilian clothes for use when I'm overseas, in case I have to escape from a belligerent country. They gave us a long lecture on that secret underground affair. Sh-h-h. (10/9/44)

The Underground War

Partisans, persons in Nazi-held territories who fought for the Allied cause underground, operated elaborate clandestine operations that assisted many downed US airmen to get back to Allied-held territory. The most successful of these escape routes was called the Comet Line. Organized by Belgians, it stretched 1,200 miles from Brussels to Gibraltar. These brave souls worked the underground at great personal risk, as those who were caught helping belligerents to escape were shot by firing squad. For every airman assisted, an average of one partisan was killed.

Chuck Yeager, the fearless flier who later became a world-famous test pilot, was helped to escape through the Pyrenees Mountains along the French-Spanish border after being shot down on March 5, 1944. Yeager eventually made it back to England to fly again.

In addition to helping escaped POWs, partisans were active in disrupting enemy communications, intelligence, and small-scale combat operations. The clandestine operations are a testament that even in the worst of times, human greatness emerges and, staring unspeakable risk in the face, miraculously succeeds in saving lives. Such is war. It also shows that for all the brutal inhumanity of the Nazi occupiers, they were unable to extinguish all vestiges of freedom in conquered lands. The spark of liberty lived even in the darkest abyss of tyranny. Yugoslav partisans were to play a role in Lt. Neilson's and his crew's survival of a harried mission that ended in the Adriatic Sea off the island of Vis.[16]

Transport Ship Athos II
October 13-29, 1944

We are in a convoy of all sorts and varieties of vessels

Well, this is another in the long line of experiences that have come my way as a result of this war. For, here I am amidst the crowded conditions

of a transport ship, rolling + tossing in a sea swept by a sharp northeast breeze. We are in a convoy of all sorts + varieties of vessels making their way to their overseas destinations.

We loaded on at Hampton Roads on Friday evening, on *Betty's birthday; but, the ship didn't move down Chesapeake Bay + into the ocean until early on Saturday morning. We are on a French transport of about 22,000 tons (one of a larger type). It is just about as loaded as you've always seen the troop ships in the news reels. There's hardly room to move around + they have continuous waves of men pouring into the mess hall, 24 hours a day, in order that everyone may get the prescribed 2 meals per day.

With a 14 day voyage to anticipate, relief from boredom is a major problem. You can't sleep or read all the time; and there's little else to do except to walk the decks + trip over all the other people. We have a boat-drill + an air-raid drill every day; and, we have to keep our individual share of the cramped quarters as neat as possible. Outside of that, there's nothing to do!

Everyone can stay on deck at all times, day + night. However, nobody is allowed to smoke at night + the ship is completely blacked out. It is so black that you actually cannot see your hand in front of your face, let alone any other boats in the convoy. Everyone is having a great time bumbling into the scattered few Red Cross hostesses aboard.

One deck is reserved for officers to roam on, play cards, etc. It is nothing but a bare troop ship, with the P.X. being the only available luxury. Officers and men live in similar quarters. You see, there are 800 officers aboard + there's only 1st class accommodations for 250. So, the rest of us ride like cattle. Even so, there's as many as 12 senior officers to a 1st class stateroom! (10/16/44)

*October 13

We all had already concluded that we were heading for the 15th Air Force in Italy

Well, we are 5 days at sea, at this juncture, approximately in the middle of the big pond. I never thought that a person could be so bored. But, I for one am just about ready to start climbing up + down the riggings

for want of something to do. The Special Service officer has provided tin flutes, playing cards, weaving materials, song books and all kinds of games to keep people amused. Still in all, there's nothing special to do, the boat is too crowded.

They announced yesterday that the probable destination of the boat was Naples, Italy. Of course, nobody was very much surprised or excited, because we all had already concluded that we were heading for the 15th Air Force in Italy.

As could be expected, the food is not very palatable. But, nobody is hungry because there's no way to get any exercise except by walking around a small upper deck. Dunn has not been above decks since he got on the boat. He's been too sick + too weak most of the time. He's having quite a time of it. He never wants to see the ocean again!

The only constructive thing I've been doing, lately, is getting some useful experience + practice in speaking the French language with sailors on this boat. I find that I'm fairly able to carry on an intelligent conversation. I know most of the words, but practice is the essence of speaking fluently. One of the navigators + myself have passed 3 consecutive nights talking with various members of the crew. Maybe, I'd be better off if I met someone who knew the Italian language.

Well, another game of "Hearts" is in the making; so, I'll close for now, with a hollow + puzzled feeling, and love, from George. (10/19/44)

They have had to pull several fellows down from the ship's rigging

We have been at sea for 8 days and we've not spotted land once, yet. Some of the "eager-beaver" navigators got their sextants into action during the past few days, with the result that today they determined our position to be Azores. By Monday night, then, we will have spanned one of the largest gaps in the Atlantic Ocean, the 3,200 miles between Virginia + Gibraltar! After we go through the Straits of Gibraltar, it is still a 4 or 5 day journey!

During the past few days, I've been amusing myself by playing records over the public address system which reaches the entire boat. We get daily newsflashes + they've kept us posted on the latest developments, the Philippines, etc.

Yesterday + today were the first days that the sun has been out. So, now I believe that the sun actually does come out, over the ocean. When the sun is out, it makes you feel as if you were not too far from shore. The weather has been fairly decent, as far as having storms is concerned. I wouldn't say that it has been as rough as the trip gets between Boston and New York. There have been relatively few victims of the *"Mal-de-Mer." Anyhow, when this boat ride has seen its day, I think that I will have had my fill of boats, the transport kind, at least. Of course, being on an army transport wouldn't make me prejudiced, oh, no!!!

It's a good way to get plenty of sleep + rest, if that's what a person desires. However, I can never seem to satisfy my restlessness; so, you can imagine how I'd be if I were at home + in my present state of mind. (10/22/44)

*French for sea-sick

This is an opportune time to tell you about the enlisted members of our crew

Well, we're still roaring along at the express train rate of 16 or 17 miles per hour! Talk about monotony! Why everyone has gone either stir-crazy or they have bed-sores from lying in bed all day.

Since I've never adequately described the members of our crew to you, I think that this is an opportune time to tell you about the enlisted members of our crew.

First off, the "headman" is Thomas Conway, who is the engineer. He ordinarily stands between the pilot + co-pilot + acts as a general handy man, to change fuses, transfer fuel, check the various systems, bring up sandwiches, etc. Conway is a typical "Joisey" rough-talking boy, who hails from Kearney, N.J. His expressions are typical of "there ain't no more sandwiches" variety! He's very "eager" + respectful. Although he's not the brainiest fellow in the world, he's willing to learn + therefore does a good job. He's only 19, never cuts his hair + always says, "Let's get on the ball, youse guys." But, he's a real, well-meaning fellow.

Next, the radio man is Jones. Carl Jones is only 19, too, + he hails from Spokane, Washington. He has a pretty new wife who comes from Minnesota (now there). He is a typical looking, tow headed Swede who

is very good at his job. Assumes no initiative or responsibility, but he always does what he is told. He generally eats more than his share of the sandwiches + those, before we are off the ground. He's very likeable + he's always up to practical jokes, the responsibility of which he is always innocent. While on the ground, he never shows up for his formations + is always in the wrong place; but, he's never late for flying.

The 3rd ranking crew member is Everett Ingwell, the armorer-gunner, who hails from Quincy, Illinois. His job is to assist Dunn in loading + arming the bombs, and to man one of the waist guns. He's a clean-cut, grown-up acting fellow of about 21 years, who comes from Illinois (I said that before, I guess). He's single, + a very quiet fellow, who generally appears bored with the situation, although he's no slacker + does his job. He, too, is a conscientious boy! On the ground, he's always out on dates with the local girls!

Our other waist gunner is Arnold Frank, who comes from Racine [Wisconsin]. He's a "wild + wooly" character, with a cigar in his face, continually + with a never ceasing supply of disparaging remarks about the others. At 24, he's the oldest member of the outfit + he has a wife of 4 years, with a little girl at home. He's got an Andy Devine voice + it's always "But sir, I didn't know I was supposed to be on interphone."

The "little boy" or the "baby" of the crew is Elf[r]en Gallego. He comes from Sacramento, Cal. He's 19 + and still a "boy" in all his ways. He's quiet, polite + his hobby is drawing cartoons. He, unlike the other 5, does not drink or smoke. He's a good Catholic + he's "eager." He is the fellow who operates the lower ball turret guns, where a small fellow is required! He also knows enough about radio to help out in a pinch!

Finally, we have our tail gunner, Mark Youell, who also comes from Spokane. He's also quiet + the least emotional of the boys. You'd take him for a country boy. He has a pimply face + he only speaks in answer to questions! He is 20 years old, I believe. I imagine he just about finished high school, before coming into the service. As are most tail gunners, he is quite allergic to air-sickness. Other than that, he seems like a fellow least likely to lose his head in an emergency!

To give you an idea of how they get along in the plane, for example, Gallego + Jones are continually joking about things that happened "back in the barracks." Conway + Frank are always kidding about "that girl I

saw you with" + Ingwell likes to park himself silently in the waist. Finally, Youell is usually very attentive at his lonely post in the tail! When the time for promotion comes, Conway + Jones will move ahead, because of their aggressiveness and general ability. That's how they shape up. I think that they are well taken care of, except for lack of experience. The only thing more we could hope for is a man with previous combat experience. However, we're not complaining.

With that, I'll close + go up on deck to try + get a little exercise on this, the 10th day out of sight of land! (10/24/44)

Like the mariner Columbus and his crew, the weary troops must have been thrilled at the first sight of dry earth after a long sea voyage.

The convoy steamed majestically through the straits that divide the continents

Well, we finally saw land today! For, at about 8:00 a.m., the barren, forlorn looking mountains of the coasts of Spain and Morocco came into view. It was cold + clear, as a normal, sharp, fall morning at home would be. Naturally everyone crowded on deck for that long curiosity quest, the sight of Gibraltar.

Everyone patiently waited + watched as the convoy steamed majestically through the straits that divide the continents of Africa + Europe, as you well know. It was a very thrilling spectacle, as the ships followed their zig-zag trail through those strategically precious waters. Patrol bombers + a squadron of navy fighters kept swooping down as we passed through into the Mediterranean. Of course, the keynote of the entire event was when we reached the narrow part of the straits, with the famous "Rock" sitting proudly off the main isthmus, as if it had been built + planted there as a fortress. As it is always depicted, it is just one tremendous mass of rock honeycombed "to the teeth" with fortifications. The guns are supposed to be big enough to blow any unauthorized vessel right plum out of the straits! So, one more adventure is written to my book of experiences! You know, our navy is really making this scenic voyage into a pleasure cruise!

So, tonight we're steaming through the Mediterranean, another ocean! We'll be there in our destination in a few days, I hope. My feature statement for tonight is, "I hate this d---d boat ride!! (10/25/44)

We anchored in one of the world's most scenic and beautiful harbors

Well, our epic journey ended at 3:20 yesterday when we anchored in this, one of the world's most scenic and beautiful, harbor[s]. It was on a Saturday morning when the impressive "Alcatraz" looking island that we all know as the "Isle of Capri," first came into view. As we came closer, you could see that it was a great resort center, with beautiful homes + hotels, bounded on all sides by a 100 ft. sheer cliff. We passed about 500 yards from this storybook spot, which also forms the outer breakwater to the Bay of Naples. After passing the isle, we made a right turn around a point of land that put us in plain view of the oft-painted and photographed Bay of Naples, with the cities of Pompeii + Naples set off by Mt. Vesuvius. It certainly was beautiful as we steamed into the outer harbor, where the ship anchored for about ½ hour!

But, that's where the story must end, for when we moved into the inner harbor, to the so-called docking facilities, the scene was all shifted to one of the grim tragedy of war. So, we stayed aboard all night and we are now preparing to debark. From here, nobody knows where we're headed for, as usual. (10/29/44)

It is impossible to know all that was going through the minds of the ten men in Lt. Neilson's crew as they arrived in Fortress Europe. The boys knew they were not in Italy for a pleasure trip. In the shadows of the beautiful sites of the Bay of Naples lay the ravages of war, the front having passed through southern Italy the previous year. It was just another of the many ironies of the time.

Well, from now on I shall attempt to write all my correspondence to you by air mail. This morning was the first opportunity that I had to secure any air mail paraphernalia. I believe that air mail will get there between 6 + 12 days after it leaves here.

Of course this is the romantic Neapolitan area of Italy, where the sun always shines, etc. Well, I'll tell you that we saw the sun for the first time in Italy, this morning. If it hadn't come out, the mud would have come up to our hips, today! (10/31/4)

When the engineers carved airfields out of the soil of southeastern Italy, mud was a huge problem. The soil was heavy clay and the rainwater did not absorb easily. The engineers had to lay acres of steel mats to form runways, so bad was the mud problem near Foggia.[20]

We found things as advertised, filthy, slovenly, degenerate

As I have written previously, I am at a replacement depot, where I'll be for only a few days, before they assign me to one of the heavy-bomber bases, here in Italy. In the meantime, we have nothing to do but eat unusually fine food + sleep in unusually dingy quarters. So, we are at liberty to go + come to the "big city," nearby. Last night, I made my first trip into town with Foster. Since we didn't know the way around, we spent most of the time looking for the main street. Naturally, all streets are black + dark; so it was hard to find the main "via." But first, let me tell you about our ride into town in one of the American trucks which passes along the highway near this field, as a part of the principal Allied supply line. The sergeant was from Chicago + he was stationed at another nearby town. He asked me where I came from + if I knew a Duke Farnham from Medford. I told him that he went to school with my brother. Anyway, Duke is at a hospital in that same town. I told him to remember Bob to him.

When we got into town, we found things as advertised, filthy, slovenly, degenerate, etc. In desperation to get food, the common thing is for the little brothers of girls to be out in the streets, bellowing the expressions of filth, in order to bring soldiers to them + do business. Everything is G.I. around town, transportation and all. I paid 15 cents for a better haircut than you get at home for 75 cents. Little boys will pay $2.00 per pkg. of cigarettes that cost our boys $.05. So, you can imagine what they must pay for them, in town!

You can tell that we're not in the U.S. anymore, by the way the fighter planes buzz around. 5 minutes ago a fellow came so low that his propeller blast knocked off the top of the trees, at about 450 m.p.h. He was in a P-51. It will cost little or nothing to exist around here. Every-thing is G.I. or costs little or nothing. Candy + soap, etc. amounts to $2.00 per week, at the most. We are using Allied Military Currency, adapted to Italian use. $1.00 = 1 lire, etc. This currency is used to prevent inflation, here! (10/31/4)

For several days, Neilson's crew and some forty others like his were holed up in Naples, where George had the time of his life attending opera at one of the four finest opera houses in Italy. He visited the ancient ruins of Pompeii below Mt. Vesuvius. The young man craved such educational experiences that stimulated his mind. Outside the enclaves of a vibrant culture was a war-torn country inhabited by a downtrodden people.

Like the rest of the people, they have been reduced to nothing

"Non cabisch d'Italian." Well, I spent another day in the city yesterday, seeing all the art + architecture which abounds in this area. In the old Roman world, this was the most beautiful of all cities. Now, it is second only to Rio de Janiero.

You'd be surprised to note how well many of the people speak English around here. A year of British + American occupation has taught them much. Many of the younger children speak fluent English. I guess when you're hungry, you learn to speak the language quickly. The people who work at the port, for the Allies, get about 80 cents per day + one good meal, and, amongst the lower class, they are very well off!

In search of a public place to eat last night, Foster + I found a private home near the "Via Roma" (main street in town), where they had some "black market" steak. It was well cooked + the place was clean and neat, with all the pictures of the relatives on all the walls. Then, when we got finished, we learned that they were part of the Caruso family that produced Enrico Caruso, the great singer. In fact, the old woman in the house claimed to be his sister. They weren't wealthy, but one of the boys

said that Enrico's brother got all the money, what there was! Like the rest of the people, though, they have been reduced to nothing, practically. We rode back to the field in a staff car with a colonel, by the way. He was a "good Joe," too! (11/1/4)

It was a gorgeous sight

Last night, I can truthfully say, I had one of the best experiences of my life! For, I attended the opera at one of the best of the world's opera houses, "San Carlos" Opera House. To begin with, it was one of the most beautiful building[s] I have ever been in, all the Roman architecture, etc. There are 6 balconies in the "Teatro Di San Carlos." In addition, they have a highly ornamented, crowned box for the King and Queen. When it began, the orchestra began by playing the French, American + English national anthems, "La Marseillaise," "Star Spangled Banner" + "God Save the King," in that order. The Barber of Seville, evidently a favorite amongst the Italians, was Benvenuto Franci. The only way you could describe it is to say that it was a gorgeous sight that not everybody in the world gets to see!! It only costs 100 lire ($1.50) even for officers. It is supported by the British Military Authority. It looks to me like a good will gesture on the part of England + the Allies to keep the Italian morale high + install confidence, by keeping their beloved opera alive! (11/2/44)

Pompeii

Well, I continued my "Cook's Tour," this afternoon, when the entire crew went on a Red Cross sponsored tour to the ancient, buried city of Pompeii!! Pompeii is about an hour's train ride from town, via the narrow-gauge electric railway! Yes, Pompeii is truly a place of curiosity + wonder, not to mention being surprisingly preserved and elaborate, for a city that was buried for 17 centuries. It seems that Pompeii always gets the brunt of Vesuvius's action, while "Napoli" never has been harmed. Even last spring, an eruption sprinkled Pompeii with dust. Naples is just as vulnerable, geographically; but, it never gets the lava. By the way, Vesuvius is only 1100 feet high. It is not a high mountain!

At the conclusion of our tour, the 5 of us, who had this one guide, gave him $5.00 for which he was thankful, + walked out into the "new" city of Pompeii, where we saw the world's 3rd most beautiful cathedral, the "Sancte Virgine Rosari" (Church of the Rosary). It is very small; but it is where Archbishop Rossi, of Pompeii, holds forth. I have never seen more beautiful painting, nor a more richly ornamented altar in my life. It was gorgeous.

The only conceivable way to escape this damp cold

So, hungry + foot-sore, we took the train back to town at 6:00. Arriving at the Red Cross center, we had cookies + ice-cream + Foster and I, alone now, are writing home. Food is very, very scarce over here, except in camp; so, it's hard to satisfy your hunger in the city. I might add that we will live quite a primitive life over here. We'll probably always be in tents (unlike England); so, it will be rugged! You see, Italy is only a temporary affair!! (11/3/44)

It is now 9:30, in my damp, chilly tent, while the big football games at home are probably at the height of their excitement. It really does not seem as if we are so far from home. Evidently, the army newspaper for this area, "Stars and Stripes" gets all its news by radio or wire; for the daily publication keeps us abreast of all the news from the great air battle of the past week to how Toronto beat the Red Wings in Detroit!

All the 40 crews which came from Gulfport with us are going to the same place, although in different groups. If you find out what it is, the base was formerly Italy's biggest airfield, and was often mentioned in bombings, before this section was taken! I think that I shall go to bed, now, and get warm, that being the only conceivable way to escape this damp cold (just like in Arkansas). We have to have our bags ready to ship, again, tomorrow at 8:00 a.m. Imagine! It will take about 12 hours to travel 50 or 60 miles, probably in cattle cars. (11/5/44)

At the American air bases in England, the crews slept in quonset huts. Other than the fact that the roof was made of tin

rather than canvas, the conditions were not much better than what George described for Italy.

I've reached my organization

Well, Here I am! I guess that is just about the only way to describe the fact that I've reached my organization. I'll recapitulate a bit on my trip from Naples, first. We got up at 5:00, in order to eat + get to the rail station + get loaded onto the cattle cars, for the trip through the hilly regions into the interior, plain lands of Italy.

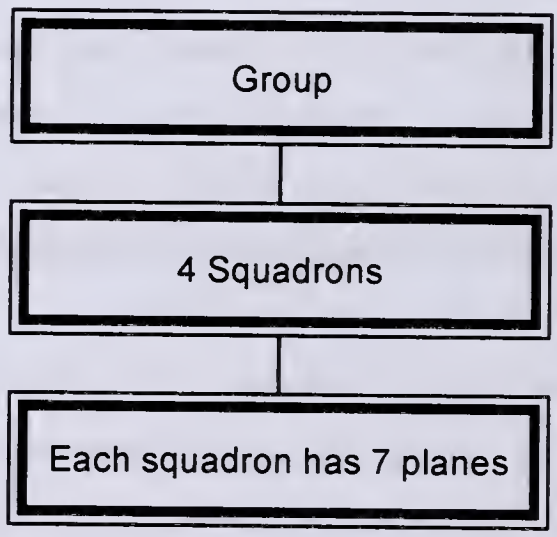
They had 26 of us in each box car, with no chairs, nothing but our mesette bags + blankets to sit on. So, as the squared-wheeled train rumbled uphill, down dale + through innumerable tunnels in the mountains, we amused ourselves by playing hearts + bridge. For food, we had our second experience with "K" rations, with all that compact vitamins, etc. You know, those "K" rations are not too bad, I guess, if you don't eat them too often! They've got all varieties, not all breakfasts are alike, nor are dinners + suppers! Another thing of interest was that the scenery, going through the coastal mountains, was very beautiful. Then, when we reached the central plain lands, there were tremendous + healthy looking fields of crops, such as you expect to find in Kansas or Nebraska. In all, we traveled 60 miles from the coast, in about 8 hours, before we reached this great zone of airfields which surround the much bombed city of Foggia (*pronounced "Fo-gia"). By truck, we were carted out to our squadron, 15 miles out of town.

The 97th Group is the oldest and most decorated Group overseas, in B-17s

All the squadrons are camped, + I do mean camped, along a long main highway. On either side, + for many miles, there is nothing but airfields + flat country to be seen. On the west, however, there are some hills in the distance. For last night, we were divided into tents with other fellows, to await the morning.

So, this morning, we awoke to find the story about this place. The 97th Group is the oldest + most decorated Group overseas, in B-17s. Of course, personnel comes and goes; but, the fact remains that the organization is

well established + led. The 340th squadron does not mean that there are 340 squadrons in this group, for there are only 3 squadrons to a group. The squadron designation has nothing to do with the Group designation. Here's briefly the story:



Since there are more crews in this squadron than 7, then everyone doesn't fly every mission. We live in tents, on cots, etc.; so, it's going to be a rough, cold, winter. The way it works is that every crew has to scavenge the countryside to obtain things to make living comfortable. For example, the captains who have been here for quite a while have their "model homes" with bricked floors, stones, shelves, clothes lockers, etc. But, we've got to start from scratch as soon as we have a permanent tent. Believe me, this is life in the rugged. It is just as if they made a great air base out in Iowa or Kansas, all tents + temporary headquarters buildings are dissected farm houses, etc. They do have hot showers, though. Everything is almost impossible to get in the way of luxuries, candy, writing paper, etc. Almost the entire 15th Air Force is centered about this area, by the way, spread all over the countryside, of course.

First off the docket will be our orientation, for a few days. We have to get all the pertinent information before we fly any; so, we'll still be on the ground for a while. All I can say about this place is that it is not like the pictures you see of the set-up in England. However, I'd just as soon live a rough life for a while. It will probably be good for me. If I get some half decent food, I'll be satisfied. (11/7/44)

*Italian pronunciation is *Faw'-zhia.*

As a final note to this chapter, George's hope of being able to fly a B-17 to Europe with his crew went unfulfilled. However, this disappointment had the handprint of divine providence. On the long, boring days aboard the Athos II, Lt. Neilson made an acquaintance that was to make possible one of the greatest experiences of his life. And for all the high-tension episodes that were to take place in hostile skies, this one took place on the ground, off duty, in an Italian farmhouse. In time, the Neilson family would deeply appreciate the fact that the young man's overseas transit was on a slow, crowded ship.

Preparation Completed

It had been twenty months since George arrived in Atlantic City for in-processing in the USAAF. During this time, he lived in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Alabama, Arkansas (three bases), Florida (two bases), and Mississippi. Finally, on November 6, 1944, the young officer arrived at his permanent duty station in the Fifteenth Air Force in Foggia, Italy. He had endured almost two years of training in the competitive world of military aviation. Now, he was cast out of the frying pan and into the fire. For the next eleven months, Neilson would live the life of a heavy bomber pilot in the war to defeat Nazi Germany and its Axis of tyranny. What follows is the incredible story of George's combat missions. Everything the young man had worked and trained and sweated for during the past twenty months would be tested in the extreme over twenty-eight aerial combat missions. This was to be a test of endurance, of performance under some of the most stressful conditions imaginable, when life and death seemed to fall on split-second chance. Under threat of destruction, frostbite, and anoxia in the rarefied atmosphere five miles above the surface of the earth, he would be called on to apply all of his training with his and the lives of nine other men at stake. At the same time, George would be living in a cold, damp, mud-bound tent city nearly four thousand miles from home. In this he bore, along with millions of his countrymen, the grim task of bringing about the final collapse of one of the most barbaric organizations that was ever foisted upon the inhabitants of this planet in the name of government.

Chapter 15

Field Combat Readiness, November 1944

Amendola Air Base
Foggia, Italy

The Fifteenth Air Force

As the air war penetrated deeper and deeper into the Reich, it became clear to the Allied joint chiefs of staff that a southern base of air operations was needed. Hitler had built his synthetic oil plants in Eastern Europe out of range of the bombers flying out of England. With the introduction of the P-51 Mustang and the use of auxiliary fuel tanks, fighter escort became feasible all the way to Berlin. Still, easier access to oil and other vital targets in the south and center of the Reich was needed.

At meetings of the combined joint chiefs of staff of England and the United States at Casablanca (January 1943), Trident (May 1943), and Quebec (August 1943), the objectives of the combined air offensive were established, primarily oil and industrial targets. To facilitate this directive, General Henry H. "Hap" Arnold, commander of the army air forces in Washington, backed the creation of the Fifteenth Air Force to relieve pressure on the England-based Eighth and more efficiently reach southern targets. The joint chiefs approved the formation of the Fifteenth on October 16, 1944, its headquarters established at Bari on the Adriatic coast of Italy. The Fifteenth was the heir of the heavy bomb groups of the Twelfth and Ninth Air Forces that had supported the Africa campaign and the invasion of Italy. The Twelfth would continue to support tactical operations in the fight for Italy, while the Fifteenth would operate in the broader scope of the Mediterranean and Balkan regions, including Romania,

Yugoslavia, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Italy, Bulgaria, Hungary, Greece, Austria, and eastern Germany.[1]

The Fifteenth operated from November 1943 until the German surrender in May 1945, a period of eighteen months. At its greatest strength, it included twenty-one bomb groups including B-24 and B-17 units, seven fighter groups, and one photoreconnaissance group. The Fifteenth was predominantly a B-24 kingdom. Of the five heavy bomber wings (containing three to six bomb groups each) only one, the Fifth Bombardment Wing, was a B-17 wing. It included the Second, Ninety-Seventh, Ninety-Ninth, 301st, 463rd, and 483rd Bomb Groups. The Ninety-Seventh, which Neilson's crew belonged to, was headquartered at Amendola AB.[2]

Until the final weeks of the European war, the Luftwaffe fighters, despite their declining numbers, were active in the skies over the premiere targets of the Fifteenth. In combination with flak guns, these defenses exacted a painful toll on the bombers and fighter escorts that flew out of Italy. Though losses had been significantly reduced from the terrible days of 1942–1943 when heavies flew unescorted over enemy territory, no missions over strategic hot spots were "milk runs," the fliers' term for lightly or non-defended targets.

Upon its activation on November 1, 1943, Major General James H. Doolittle assumed command of the newly created Fifteenth Air Force. Doolittle, a known racer in the interwar years, gained notoriety in April 1942 when he led squadrons of B-25 Mitchells in daring bomb raids over Tokyo. He assumed command of the Twelfth in Tunisia, preparing for the Allied invasion of Africa. Some claimed that he was the most successful airman in the world.[3]

Officially, the mission of the Fifteenth AF was fourfold: 1) achieve air superiority by destroying the Luftwaffe in the air and on the ground; 2) participate in Operation Pointblank, the Anglo-American combined bomber offensive against Axis strategic targets; 3) support ground forces in the Mediterranean theater; and 4) attack Axis forces and facilities in the Balkans.[4]

Foggia, a farming center just above the spur of the *boot* of Italy 150 miles southwest of Rome and seventy miles north of Bari, became the home for most of the Fifteenth Air Force. Located ten miles from the Adriatic coast, there was not much to invite a traveler when Jimmie Doolittle set up shop. The British had captured the area the previous October, pushing out the German and Loyalist Italian Fascist defenders but leaving behind a bombed-out plain. Contrary to earlier assumptions, the weather in southeast Italy was a far cry from the sunny Mediterranean climate planners envisioned. In the area were twenty-one airfields for fighter and bomber aircraft, all reduced to slimy mud from the clay soils and frequent rains in the region. The Fifteenth was set up originally with 930 aircraft, 200 officers, and 20,000 men.[5]

Tillman[6] described Foggia's surroundings:

> Another group history describes Foggia weather as "very harsh. The summers were hot and dusty. The winters were cold and wet. Buildings were few, and airplane maintenance crews worked in the open. The men lived in tents using homemade gasoline stoves for heat. The men constantly had to struggle through mud and water, snow and ice, or choking dust, depending on the season."

The rainy season arrived in Italy in mid-September, 1944 canceling missions on many days. The Fifteenth command issued winter standards for tents. "Each tent floor was to be covered with brick, tile, lumber, or gravel, with walls of adobe-like 'tufti,' or lumber, at least eighteen inches above ground level."[7]

The Fifteenth faced the same problems the Eighth had encountered: the fallacy of self-defending bombers, inaccuracy of high altitude bombing, and the capacity of the enemy to repair and disperse key installations. Thus, oil, industrial, and transportation

targets had to be attacked over and over again to achieve lasting results.

By mid-1944, the German defensive strategy had shifted:

> Axis fighters posed the greatest threat to the Fifteenth during its first eight months. But from June 1944 onward, flak took an increasing toll: throughout the year the Fifteenth Air Force attributed nearly seven hundred bomber losses to enemy fighters and 950 to AA guns.
>
> The Germans' success in downing Allied bombers, however, came at immense cost. That summer the Luftwaffe flak arm deployed 662,000 troops and nearly half a million auxiliaries, including old men, boys, women, and even fifty thousand Russian POWs—in all, more than one-third of the 2,890,000 personnel.[8]

On January 3, 1944, Jimmy Doolittle turned over command of the Fifteenth to Lt. Gen. Nathan F. Twinning. Doolittle went to England to replace Ira C. Eaker, one of the founders of the Eighth AF in 1942. Twinning came from a long line of military leaders, graduated from West Point, and had led the Thirteenth AF in the Pacific until the B-17 he was riding went down in the ocean. He survived six days at sea before being rescued. Twinning was a capable leader, reasonably able to follow command, with a few diversions of expediency. He led the Fifteenth for the remainder of the war.[9]

The Fifteenth Air Force reached, at its zenith, about half the strength of the Eighth. The term Mighty Eighth was the legacy of the England-based units. This moniker was no less deserved because the Fifteenth lacked such a signature, but it caused some resentment in Foggia, from whence thousands of courageous men flew and died for freedom.[10] This feeling by the men of the Fifteenth that it was the stepchild of the Eighth was entirely unmerited, as the Fifteenth suffered loss rates at least as high as

the Eighth throughout its period of service. As the belief prevailed in the Fifteenth that the Eighth captured more than its share of headlines, the lead airmen in Italy penned the following, which was sung to the tune of "As Time Goes By":

> It's still the same old story
> The Eighth gets all the glory,
> While we go out to die.
> The fundamental things apply,
> As flak goes by[11]

An Experiment in Soviet Cooperation

The eastern front in the Soviet Union was a huge factor in the ultimate defeat of Germany. Although the Soviets were in the Allied camp, they were so mostly by sharing a common enemy rather than in a sense of full cooperation. The Soviet Union, being the world's leading Communist nation, had national goals and doctrine that were diametrically opposed to that of the Western democracies. Thus, the alliance, if it could be called one, was situational only. In a rare example of cooperation, Soviet leader Josef Stalin agreed to the temporary establishment of US air bases in Ukraine to operate shuttle-bombing missions. Planes of the Fifteenth AF would fly between Italy and Ukraine, bombing in each direction. The goal was to place air units closer to the oil plants in the east. The plan, known as Operation Frantic, was short-lived, as the poorly defended airfields were attacked by the Luftwaffe, and large numbers of US planes were destroyed on the ground.[12]

97th BOMB GROUP

Upon arrival at the 97th Bomb Group headquarters, I learned that it had the record for having flown the most bombing missions of any Group in the Southern Europe, or Mediterranean Theater of Operations. While I was there, and by the end of the war, it

had accumulated 456 missions. My crew was sent there as a replacement for a crew that had completed its quota of 35 missions and was being "rotated" back to the United States.

At the 97th, we had the same quarters as all the other Air Corps people in the area—tents. The officers had 4 people in each tent. The enlisted men had 6 people in each tent. As we arrived, it was the beginning of November, the weather was getting cool, especially at night. Most of the tent-dwellers made it their business to arrange for "furnaces" consisting of 5-gallon gasoline storage cans, being supplied by an airplane fuel line running from an outside mounted fuel tank (from a fighter plane's wing) by an airplane fuel-line. While this was inherently a dangerous arrangement, with a little care and concern it provided the heat we needed, at night, before we retired. Sometimes, we made French-toast with bread from the mess hall, or cooked things out of a package from home.

A Quonset hut (pre-fabricated, temporary building designed at the marine base at Quonset, R.I.) served as our mess hall. Our squadron headquarters building was one of the Italian residences built as a farm program, under Italy's wartime dictator, Benito Mussolini. The line-up of tents and miscellaneous buildings was duplicated for each of the 4 squadrons in the 97th Bomb Group: the 340th Bomb Squadron, the 342nd Bomb Squadron, the 341st Bomb Squadron and the 414th Bomb Squadron. The spirit of the organization was high so that our crew was quickly amalgamated into the organization, and its mission responsibilities.

Mission of the 97th Bomb Group

Our crew, as part of the 340th Bomb Squadron and the 97th Bomb Group had the mission of bombing so-called strategic targets in Germany, Austria, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Yugoslavia. At this stage of the war, in late 1944, and on into 1945, the primary targets continued to be: supply depots in the various countries, munitions factories and, most of all S.O.R – synthetic oil refineries in [eastern] Poland, eastern Czechoslovakia, and eastern Germany. The Nazi organization had seen their natural oil

field sources destroyed, methodically, by the strategic bombers. The most famous of these sources was the Ploesti Oil Fields, in Romania. This target area was finished off before our crew arrived in Italy. Therefore, they had developed technology to manufacture oil for their various military machinery. They constructed the synthetic oil refineries in such locations where they believed them to be out of the range of the U.S. B-17s and B-24, the long-range strategic bombers that operated out of Italy and out of England. However, the United States continued to refine the capabilities of both the B-17 and the B-24. They kept upgrading the engines, and most importantly, increasing the range which these planes could fly away from their bases. For example, the production of the B-17 had progressed from Model "A" to the Model "G" while we were in Italy. The Model "G" was able to reach the synthetic oil refineries, both from England and from Italy, though they were 750 miles from either England or Italy. In two years, the range of the B-17 had been increased by about 200 miles.

Flight Organization

Each time we flew, we would fly as part of a 14 plane formation from our squadron, and always in "formation," meaning we flew close to and in synchronous with the other planes in the formation, sometimes called a "box." This called for a maximum amount of concentration because, typically, each plane was within 25 or 50 feet of 3 or 4 of the other planes. Conversely, after you got adapted to formation flying, and became comfortable with flying close to the next plane, it became a pleasant and satisfying little personal game to synchronize your eyes with your hands and feet on the flight controls to stay in formation with the plane whose wing you were flying "off of." Of course, you never watched your own plane, while flying formation; your eye was always on the next plane. Formation flying became one of the more satisfying aspects of combat flying. Amongst other things, a tight formation, high in the sky, made a smaller target both for anti-aircraft guns on the ground and to provide a more concentrated attack position, by the gunners

against enemy fighter planes trying to shoot you down. Beyond that, a tight formation would lay down a better concentration of bombs, when all bombs were dropped on the target at once. Thus, in a nutshell, all combat flying in heavy bombers was done from formation flying. To get into a formation, bombers like the B-17 would take off from the runway, in single file, then circle the field while the gathering group continues to climb slowly and gain altitude. Then, as each squadron formed-up, it would rotate away from the area of the field and join with a previously taken-off squadron as the group, usually of four squadrons, would circle still higher, and wider from the base until all squadrons were in formation. Then, the Group would depart the area to join with other groups in the bomber parade to the target area.

No matter where the targets were, they were always north of the base location, 95% of them in southern and eastern Europe, north of the Italian-Austrian Alps, beyond the Danube River. We generally flew north over the Adriatic Sea, entering the mainland of Northern Italy between the cities of Pola and Trieste in northern Italy. Usually, we were in a steady climb so that by the time we crossed the Alps mountains, [we] were at "high altitude", still climbing to the assigned penetration altitude for the mission. There was never a "neutral" country so we never flew over it. We crossed the Danube River, going north, as it runs east-west through southern Europe. By this time, we felt that we were in enemy territory, at which time anything could happen. (G.H.N., 1991)[13]

Nothing much to report, tonight. They didn't have anything for us to do except eat + sleep, today. So, I turned-in a pair of filthy O.D. clothes to be cleaned by a little Italian who seems to be hanging around. Then, I spent the entire afternoon reading up on the secret + confidential reports on the bombing raids that go out of here. They are very, very interesting. Ma, they have the disposition of enemy planes + flak guns traced from day to day. They have all sorts of photos + charts, which show the progress of the war. They have lists of types of targets which are on priority for being hit. Every kind of pertinent information is available, relative to the air

war. Every possible type of statistic is collected, so that they can study the war scientifically. (11/8/44)

The Fifteenth had an entire group (three squadrons) of F-4 and F-5 fighter planes dedicated to photoreconnaissance based at Bari. At great risk, these planes flew in small numbers to take pictures of sites to be studied by target experts. The data was used to work out detailed plans for missions, such as which planes were to hit what and when.[14]

Right now, we are awaiting an order to move our tent before we make any permanent fixtures. We are going to have to go to a different location, someday. Meanwhile, an Italian down the road is making us a stove which we can install in a day or so. (11/8/44)

"Emperor Franklin" took the ignorant masses by the heels, once again

For the first time since I left Camp Patrick Henry, I received some mail today! Believe me, it was quite a thrill to receive a 'bit' of mail, after a whole month without any! In fact, all that came over with me were a pretty elated bunch of fellows, all of which proves that mail call is still the most important thing that happens to a fellow in the army. I received the letter from Betty telling of Somerville's beating Medford. That was quite a bit of news I guess! I also was interested to read about Notre Dame's beating Dartmouth, too! I received a letter from Junior, which was postmarked on Oct. 2 + directed towards Gulfport. His main topic was his trip to Wales, where he spent his leave. I also got a letter from Bob, directed towards my temporary A.P.O. number. He wished me success + was sorry that I couldn't have gotten to see him before leaving Gulfport. I gather that things are also looking up for him, as he mentioned taking over a company once again, the possibilities of getting the grade he deserves. I was pleased to see that he seems a bit more encouraged about it all. Of course, he still can't spell a word correctly on the typewriter.

I heard how "Emperor Franklin" took the ignorant masses by the heels, once again! I hated to see him get in again; but, what can you do.

It was obvious that non-thinking people would be afraid to change, even though they are realizing it would be for the better!

We had an orientation lecture today, telling us the types of formations they fly here; how the group, wing, + air force assembles for a mission; all the procedures for emergencies; where the targets might be, etc.

I guess I haven't told you about the history of the 97th. It is the oldest combat group overseas, with more missions + decorations for performance than any other group. You probably recall seeing that famous picture of a B-17 returning with its entire tail assembly just hanging on. It was in all magazines + was used in insurance advertisements. Well, a man from this outfit flew that. The 97th was the first group to make a raid on Europe, from England, way back when the war started. Since, it has distinguished itself in the invasion of southern France + in inaugurating shuttle runs to Russia. The 97th ranks second to only the famous 19th Bomb Group which harassed the Japs in the Philippines, while we retreated, just after Pearl Harbor. The main units, in order, are air force, wing, group, squadron, elements, + the individual planes. When they go on a big raid, the entire organization rises and takes the form of an air force. You might compare these units with the ground forces as follows

1 bomber	=	1 squadron of men
1 element	=	1 platoon
1 squadron	=	1 company
1 group	=	1 battalion
1 wing	=	1 regiment
1 air force	=	1 army

The saying goes that B-24s absorb the brunt of the punishment over here, because there are more of them; they go at lower altitude + are more vulnerable. But, we'll have to see for ourselves. I'll have to close for my candle is almost gone. Take care of yourself, Ma + I'll do all I can to watch out for myself. (11/9/44)

Today was as cold as any November day we ever get at home. The wind blew like mad and it was rainy most of the day. It was a fit + proper

day to stay in by the fire + listen to the radio, which I did all morning. However, there isn't much heat to be had around here; so, most of the heat is an imaginary proposition. They have just completed a so-called "officers' club" in our squadron, which consists of a stone house, plastered inside + out, with a brick floor. They have improvised practically everything in the line of furnishings! The only means of heat, so far, is an inadequate fireplace. Anyway, I sat there + listened to a liaison radio out of a B-17 airplane. We can listen to all the radio stations of the British Broadcasting Company, in London.

It is pitiful to see the sights of the poor, naked and starving Italian people

This afternoon, I went to the bomb-leveled city of Foggia, to acquire my weekly ration of luxuries. They only allow one bar of soap per week, 3 bars of candy, and two packages of chewing gum.

Ma, it is pitiful to see the sights of the poor, naked and starving Italian people in these cities. If the American people could only be "indoctrinated" in the sufferings that these people endure! I'm certain, then, there would be much less of the complaining. I'm just beginning to see why the movies insist on showing the horror pictures in the newsreels every time you go. It is merely an attempt to try to show the people what the rest of the world is like. It is actually sickening to see the sights. They continually beg. They are all needy, of course. Even if they have money, they can't always buy food or clothing. (11/10/44)

Well, there's nothing exciting to report as yet. None of the new crews have flown yet; but, we've all had a chance to sit around with our mouths open + watch the fortunes of this aerial war, as it affects the various squadrons. (11/12/44)

Most bombing missions involved hundreds of heavy bombers, in order to assure that the odds of overwhelming the enemy fighters were in favor of the bombers. Also, the policy on flying in bad weather fluctuated depending on circumstances. Clear weather was great for finding targets, but it also gave the Luftwaffe

and the flak cannons an edge in taking down their prey. The air forces in the ETO experimented with radar bombing, also called "blind bombing." Results were mixed. Target strikes continued to be disappointing throughout the war, so destroying them became a game of dropping enough ordnance over time to compensate for the low rate of accuracy.[15]

They had a sort of Italian U.S.O. show

We had a very fine lecture on evasion + escape by the group intelligence officer, this morning. Someday, I'll be able to tell you all about how the system of having Allied airmen return from their wrecked planes, operates. Of course, it's all luck; but, if a fellow uses his head, he can get through undreamed of places.

This evening, I went to mass at Group Headquarters which is about 3 miles down the road. The chapel has its home in a farmhouse, like everything else around here. The chaplain has to serve 3 groups, or all the Catholics in 5000 men. So, he's pretty short-handed.

After mass, I went into the group briefing room, which also serves as the theatre. They had a sort of Italian U.S.O. show. It was a review, a stage show, a Vanities or whatever you care to call it. At any rate, all the artists were high class. They had musicians, singers, dancers, comedians, etc. It was like one of the "Broadway Melody" pictures, if you get what I mean.

All I wish is that they could invent a way to heat these tents as we would like to have them heated. All we have for heat, anywhere, is primitive gasoline stoves. And, when all is said and done, the stoves heat more of the entire countryside than they do of the tents themselves. You see, we are more nearly on the Adriatic Coast of the country, about 10 miles from the coast, in fact. We are in what you'd call a coastal plain which is enveloped in cold, damp air. And, you know how the sea air is in wintertime. (11/12/44)

I feel as green and as new as I did when I started high school

To begin with, all the pilots will start off as co-pilots on experienced crews for 3 or 4 missions. So, the navigators + bombardiers will fly a few

missions with other crews too. For the purpose of the first few missions, the crew will not fly as a unit. The object of that is so that there will be no "green" crews going out. You know, I feel as green and as new as I did when I started high school, college, came into the army or any other of the new adventures I've experienced. I guess everything looks hard + impossible, at first. However, having had the experience of "I don't know how I'll ever get through cadets," in addition to the other things I've plunged into + succeeded, I now begin to look at it philosophically. I actually feel as unconfident of myself as I did when I began cadet training. Yet, like everything else, I am impatient to begin. I keep wondering if I'll be able to stand up, during any excitement, etc. But, I guess I am only normal like most of the others.

By the way, a tour of duty here, now, calls for a total of 35 sorties over the target. That differs from the "mission" designation in many ways. Formerly, the tour of duty was 50 missions. However a mission does not mean you have to go over the target. For, you could turn back, + if you had been over half way, it counted as a mission. Then, some longer missions used to count double, as long as you dropped your bombs in enemy territory, you got credit. Now, of course, it's all changed. You've got to actually drop your bombs on the given target, in order to gain credit. Each trip to the target counts as one sortie. If a plane should carry its load all the way to Vienna, through flak + all, + not be able to drop its bombs, it would not receive credit for a sortie. Lt. Col. Shafer, who is C.O. of the 340th, says it amounts to about 70 missions, in the 8th Air Force style. Fellows used to make about 20 trips out of England + finish their tour of duty. 35 sorties will amount to about 400 hours of combat flying!!! (11/13/44)

We have to search through salvaged B-17s for our parts

Look, I can't even remember what day it is. I guess that the thing we'll remember today for is the day we finally got our gasoline stove into perfect working condition. We have had trouble in securing proper connections + valves, so far. Naturally, we have to search through salvaged B-17s for our parts.

Let me tell you about our stove. To begin with, the body of it is nothing more nor less than a 10 gallon can, with a few holes punched near the bottom for draught. Inside, for a stove bed, we have a layer of gravel + rocks. On top where the cap goes, the stove pipe is attached. The rest of the stove is somewhat like your oil-burner, except that the line is connected directly to a 50 gallon drum of gasoline which is outside the tent. We have the line (fuel lines from a B-17) under the gravel floor of the tent. Our major problem has been to secure a shut-off valve with which to control the flow of gas. Finally, Jones got us a valve from an emergency oxygen bottle. We have no burner or anything. The gas simply flows out of the pipe + burns like a blow torch. That is a typical example of the stove that is commonly used around here. (11/14/44)

Tonight, I've been listening to "Sal," the famous girl who broadcasts from Berlin

About the food situation, we get plenty of what food we have, each day. There's no places to get any type of refreshment between meals; so, if a fellow fills up at meal time, he'll never starve on the food he gets here.

All the details, such as K.P., cleaning the latrine (out house), chopping wood, sweeping the club, etc., is done by Italian natives. They work, gladly, for their meals and a little money. Besides, they do carpentry work + are available to make improvement on anybody's living facilities.

The enlisted men eat of out of their mess kits, while we have everything served to us by Italians, in the "Flak Shack," name given to the officer's club, here in the squadron.

As far as the supervising personnel in our squadron, the C.O. [Commanding Officer] is a Lt. Col. Shafer, who flies lead in the squadron, whenever he flies. The administration officer is a Major Pardue, a ground man. The operations officer, the man who controls all flying personnel is a captain who has completed his 50 missions. Then, there is a 1st lieutenant intelligence officer + a captain who controls the maintenance of the planes in our squadron. The operations officer is the key man; he's the one who stipulates who will fly + when. He also records the progress and gives credit due to everyone for what they do. The rest of

the 97 officers in the squadron are one happy family of lieutenants, with a scattered few captains!

Tonight, I've been listening to "Sal," the famous girl who broadcasts from Berlin to the Allied forces in Europe. She tells them how Roosevelt has duped us into fighting, etc. She plays fine records + tries to make the boys feel lonesome for home. She speaks wonderful English; but, her commentary is very sharp + cutting. Through her, the Luftwaffe makes all its challenges to American groups who have been recognized as frequent visitors to their cities. (11/14/44)

The Nazis made relentless use of propaganda, mostly on their own people. The minister of propaganda was the notorious Dr. Joseph Goebbels who blazed the pathological doctrines of his party's perverted social theories to the masses of Germany. As one of the most familiar voices of Nazism, Goebbels and his co-fanatics preached of a future Germany that ruled Europe with an iron fist, subjugating all other nations in serfdom to the Aryan Master Race. Yet all this fiendish babble led a mighty people down the ignominious path to economic ruin, national destruction, destitution, and death on an unprecedented scale.[16]

I'll be glad to get in the air once again

Well, tomorrow morning Kiefer is scheduled to go for his first mission. He'll fly as co-pilot for a fellow who has nearly completed his missions. I am going to fly with some other fellow, not on a combat mission, but to give a plane a check flight, also tomorrow. Jones and Conway are also going to fly with me. I'll be glad to get in the air once again.

As of today, all of our enlisted men are sergeants. They were promoted according to Captain Shelton's (operations officer) promise to make them all sergeants before they go on a mission. Before they are through, 3 of them will be staff sergeants + 3 will be tech sergeants.

Right now, I'm sitting in the club room listening to the 5:00 p.m. news from New York. For example, I heard the account of how Bill Cowley's two goals paced the Bruins to a victory of Chicago, last night.

Speaking of radio, it appears now that the bad weather is beginning to hinder operations. The propaganda war is once more intensely underway. Earlier today, we heard a shortwave broadcast from Joseph Lawrence in New York. He spoke of Hitler being "hidden in his Berchtesgaden hideout playing records + avoiding the restless German populace." It looks like the Allies are going to try their annual winter attempt to seduce the Germans by propaganda. Let's hope it finds them weak enough this time. (11/15/44)

Come on up tomorrow and we'll be waiting for you

For example, the boys tell me that once last summer, bad weather kept them on the ground for 6 days. Each day, they were briefed for a trip to Vienna. On the evening of the 7th day, "Sally" came on the air + said "Well, boys, you've been briefed for 6 days for a trip to Vienna. Come on up tomorrow + we'll be waiting for you!" They went + there was nothing too unusual about the defenses. However, the moral is that she knows all about every plan we have, here. Evidently, there are plenty of spies + saboteurs with radios around here!!

Oh yes, our boat trip produced one romance; for one of the pilots who is in the 341st Sqdn., in this same group, has become pretty serious with a nurse who was on the boat + is now being assigned to a field hospital near the front lines, 200 miles north! (11/15/4)

I finally got into the air, today, flying in a plane whose engines had to be tested. So, I flew with a fellow who has completed his 50 missions. The Italian countryside is very beautiful to watch from the air, presenting a panoramic view of mountains + fertile, cleanly cultivated farm lands. Then, the Adriatic Ocean is full of fishing ships with red + other brightly colored sails.

Tonight, the squadron communications officer gave us all the necessary information which concerns radio procedure around here. It has to be pretty deceptive, very well coded + often changed so that the Nazis cannot monitor the radio frequencies. The doctor was talking about anoxia, lack of oxygen, tonight. There is only a record of 6 deaths from oxygen need, since the 15th Air Force was organized. All of these are due

to carelessness. Another thing, the average temperature at 30,000 feet has been around 55 degrees below zero, lately. Chilly, eh what? (11/16/44)

It is very impressive to see the large groups of B-24s and B17s start on their way each morning

It is very impressive to see the large groups of B-24s + B17s start on their way each morning. Then, as soon as they arrive home in the afternoon, or a little afterwards, the British Halifax Bombers begin their endless parade into the sky. So we have a situation on the field, here, where the B-17s leave in the morning + R.A.F. Halifaxes leave each night. You see, the American + British use the same fields. Since they operate at different times, there's no conflict. The R.A.F. does all its work at night, while our planes go out in the daytime, almost 100% of the time.

It is very cool, this evening; but our tent is a trifle warmer because we have our gasoline heater operating; so, I'll survive. Anyhow, I've accumulated 12 blankets, now + I'm hot on the trail of a mattress. (11/17/44)

There's nothing new to report, today. I didn't fly + of course I'm becoming foolishly impatient. It's like everything else in my life that has seemed important. I always have to wait! I seem to be in a similar mood as when I was watching the mail for my army call.

We had a very nice meal this evening: pork chops, potatoes, corn, peaches, bread-jam. It still wasn't like a Saturday night's meal at home - beans, brown bread, mustard pickle, milk + apple pie. Oh boy! I'd better quit. (11/18/44)

I went to the morning mass at the Group headquarters 11:00 a.m. As I said before, the chapel is improvised from an old stable of a farmhouse; yet, it seems to have more atmosphere than the ordinary G.I. chapel. Even so, we sit on metal cartridge containers + kneel on a concrete floor. (11/19/44)

George and two crew members took a walk in the Italian countryside. He described the tidy, white farm houses with orange

trimmings amid the wheat fields and hills further inland from the coastal plain. Herds of sheep and goats were corralled by beautiful Italian sheep dogs. The rural surroundings seemed untouched by the war. They walked twelve to fourteen miles, regretting only that they collected the dry Italian clay in their shoes while crossing fields.

Well, Kiefer went as a co-pilot again, today. They went after the Winter Haven oil storage plants near Vienna. The B-24s absorbed the punishment, I guess. Vienna is a high priority target now, because it is the main headquarters for Germany's supply in Italy. If the Russians can take Budapest + continue up the Danube to Vienna, all the Allies will have to do is bottle up the Brenner Pass + Germany is done in Italy. (11/19/44)

Brenner Pass was the main conduit for the Fifteenth Air Force movements over the Alps on the way to targets in the eastern territories of the German Reich.

In case you're interested, the major objective targets are at present nearly all in Germany! Well, adios for tonight. (11/19/44)

I'm all happy once again, for I received the long delayed airmail letters that you sent, Ma on Oct. 16 + Oct. 31. I didn't receive a letter from you in 37 days from Oct. 13 to Nov. 20. That's too long of a time! Believe me, Ma, I always did appreciate your letters; but, the ones which arrived today were like heaven on earth. Yes, 19 months away from home does not dull the edge on the closeness to the people at home, at least in thought! (11/20/44)

Ma, I'm going to bring an Italian Sheep Dog home with me

We get a big kick out of the German propaganda from Berlin! Tonight, the male commentator spoke of how Patton's forces had been so mauled that it became necessary to halt the offensive. He also told how poorly equipped our men were, judging by the many American prisoners that were taken around Aachen who were suffering from frostbite, how

America fears the German rockets, how German morale is better than ever, etc. He claimed that the offensive at Belfort was at the cost of the greatest casualties in history! "Axis Sally" failed to show up with her music tonight; so, the boys got pretty bitter about it.

One thing is for sure, I will never get too far away from the squadron, for any length of time, for this is the only place you can eat! It isn't like being in [the] U.S. + going to town for dinner. All you can get is sugarless cake + ice cream at the Red Cross, if you eat in town. All Italian places are "off limits." Ma, I'm going to bring an Italian Sheep Dog home with me. They're the friendliest dogs there are. They're big, brown + white collie-like affairs. They all look alike, too. Unlike the people, they are strong + healthy looking. (11/21/44)

If I were home, I'd probably be picking at the candy dishes and sneaking into the kitchen to slice slabs of white meat off the bird's breast as he simmers on top of the gas stove.

To get back to life as it is today, it was really a day of rejoicing + thanksgiving around here. It was a clear, chill[y] day that would have been excellent for the Malden-Medford game, had it been scheduled for one of Foggia's extensive cow pastures. On top of that, there was a sign in [the] operations office which read, "Thanksgiving – Holiday! No Mission!" I got myself into some clean green pants + shirt + headed for the Group Chapel for Mass + communion. As the chaplain mentioned, I guess we have a lot to be thankful for, even though we are far away in a peasant-inhabited, backward country. After all, Hitler might have possibly extended his path of destruction as far as home.

Since the feature event of the day, the dinner, was scheduled for the supper meal, there was nothing more attractive to do than a good, old-fashioned game of football, out on the grassland behind the tent area. So, a lot of us worked up an appetite from 11:30 'til 3:30, playing the game. The players included the colonel (Lt. Colonel Shafer) + all the various degrees of servitude, down to the lowest private. I sat down to the meal, at 4:30 + it was very good, relatively speaking. Despite the strangeness of the scenery, etc., the entire atmosphere in our little squadron location was one of quiet + "take it easy" just like Thanksgiving at home!!

Yesterday, I flew up to 22,000 ft. in a plane that was having its radio, radar + bombing equipment checked + I didn't go far. There was a raid scheduled for Munich. All the planes that went, actually crossed the target but only a few dropped their bombs. The weather was too bad for a formation flight, so it cost the gov't plenty of money to send planes on a useless mission.

Thank God for all that has come my way so far; and thank you, Ma, for being such a good + faithful mother. I always pray that God will grant you health + happiness. (11/23/44)

We tore our shabby tent down and moved into the more luxurious quarters

Well, the big doings today was that we had to move again. So Kiefer had negotiated for a tent belonging to fellows who were to move into a stone house, as soon as one of the older crews left. As luck would have it, the old outfit left for home today. Then, the others moved out of the tent, while we tore our shabby tent down + moved into the more luxurious quarters. The new place has a concrete floor + wooden walls. The only thing that is tent-like is the roof. There is also a ready-made clothes closet + some wall shelves. It is really very snug + we have made a new chair + table to write our letters on. It was like moving over "to the other side of the tracks," as they say in the gossip back in the neighborhood. Actually, we have a better home than some fellows who have been here for quite a while. We are now living with the blue-bloods, and if we ever get into one of the scattered stone houses which the *Ities made, we'll be as if we were on top of Beacon Hill! (Where the Cabots speak only to God). You see, there are 3 classes of domiciles in our branch of the "Foggia Estates." 1. Plain tents, 2. Tent with floor, walls, lights, etc., and 3. Stone cottage! Our oil (gasoline) tank is a 75 gallon belly tank from a P-38. We have a "front door" to our tent which is made of wood, but there is a piece of glass in it which comes from the Plexiglas nose of a B-17. I've finally located a pillow + pillow case for my bed. So, if I can appropriate some of the air-mattresses which drift around occasionally, my bedding comfort needs will have been satisfied! Jones, our radio man, has lifted sufficient radio parts to put together a radio for all to listen to.

Here in the "Flak Shak," they leave bread and jam around every night, so everybody runs to + fro the gasoline stoves, making toast, all evening.
*Italians

The boy could probably sell the cigarettes for as much as $7.00

Well, Kiefer + I flew together on a practice mission once again, today! It was a formation ride, made up of new crews and the operations officer, Captain Shelton was in the lead plane, observing who was flying + what position + how good. During the course of events, he noticed that I did pretty well + mentioned it to Kiefer when we got on the ground. It was only a two hour flight but, it was the only activity around here, today.

Foster + I went to town, this afternoon, expecting to purchase our weekly rations, only to discover that the P.X. was closed for inventory. Meanwhile, Foster had sold an extra carton of cigarettes to one of the *paysans for $5.00. It cost him exactly 50 cents! You see, some of the Italians have money which they cannot use to buy anything. The boy could probably sell the cigarettes for as much as $7.00! This evening I saw Red Cross produced musical show, at Foggia's main theatre, "Flagelle."

Today, I had the squadron insignia sewed onto that jacket which I had at home, when I was there. The squadron insignia shows a bomb dropping through a cloud, with 3 of Walt Disney's ducks hanging on for dear life. (11/25/44)
*peasants

I find myself the only member of the crew who has not been on a mission yet. That is due, mainly, to the peculiar system of the rotation which operates amongst the pilots in our squadron. So, it makes me restless. The point is that I'll have to get used to not flying with our own crew, for it may fly split-up more often than it flies as a unit. Anyhow, I'll be uneasy until I get going.

I received Betty's letter + Ma's v-mail of Nov. 9 today. I'm glad that mail goes through to home so easily because you'll feel better if I tell you more. Besides, censoring is more or less of a formality, now!

I thought you'd be interested in seeing one of the famous "Sad Sack" strips that the soldiers go crazy about, in "Yank" Magazine. (11/26/44)

George's official crew assignment was copilot, second in command to Lt. Kiefer, who was the first pilot of their crew. Since the flying time was shared, the command issue did not seem a concern to George, who saw himself more as a skilled instrument pilot than a command officer.

In his letter of November 27, George stepped back from the routine of military life to expound about the life of the Italian farmer, having encountered a family at a farmhouse adjacent to the airfield.

Their home looks like Mrs. Howard's farm in Chelmsford

Nothing special to tell about, today; so, I'll speak about the Italian peasant family that lives in its farmhouse, adjacent to the airfield across the road from our tent area. One of the boys suggested that I bring my O.D. clothes to the woman who lives there, to be cleaned. So, I've been over there twice and I've curiously talked with the man and woman, both of whom are about 45 + understand English fairly well.

To begin with, their home looks like Mrs. Howard's farm in Chelmsford; for, it's all piled around with wagon wheels, junk, mud, animal dirt, etc. The house itself is a white cement building. They grow many acres of wheat, as a means of subsistence. Besides that, they have all the animals necessary to provide all they need to get along with. Consequently, they are living healthily + heartily, while the urban population of Italy starves to death. Yet, the inside of their home, at its best, is not as clean as the inside of Teague's Cow-stable. Right next to their living room is a room where the cow, the horse, the pig + the chickens stay at night. That is typical of Italian living conditions.

For heat, they all sit around a tray of wood coals, at night, which they place in the middle of the room. Their clothes are hand-knitted, coarse woolens. Their shoes are wooden, and the old woman has a patchwork dress which she probably wears 'til it is threadbare. They keep 6 or 8 loaves of real hard bread stacked in the corner of the room like cord wood. Neither the man nor the woman have been to Naples or Rome in their lives. They have been to Foggia, Manfredonia + San Giovani, all within a radius of about 30 miles. They sell their wheat, nowadays, to the

American army for $10. per 240 Kilograms. I asked the man whether or not the Italians liked the British; and, he said, "a little bit."

The thing I notice about even these "backwoods" peasants is that they are not unlike our own farmers. They are not strange people, and they seem to understand very well what is going on. If they didn't speak a strange language, you'd think they were New England farmers, with very old-time methods of living. It's funny that every single Italian farm house is built so that the horse, the cow, the oxen, + the pigs all come in the house at night. So, naturally the whole house smells like a stable! (11/27/44)

This story shows how Neilson was always observant of his environment, finding curiosity in very ordinary things. The commonplace things he wrote of make for a colorful story of life and culture. Until the war, George had never traveled far from his New England home. Most people in the 1940s, particularly in rural areas, were not well connected to the world beyond their immediate environs. Many were born, lived their lives, and died within a very small radius. Yet it is this parochialism that makes travel fascinating. The irony that life is lived by people everywhere in a similar way yet different in particular aspects is an enlightenment to those who travel abroad.

Soldiers who go overseas gain an invaluable education in the diversity of cultures and their mentalities in the world. In so doing, they gain a perspective that contributes to understanding between nations. As isolated as the nations of the early and mid-twentieth century were, it is no surprise that cataclysmic wars took place. Man had gained the technology to create machines of mass destruction, yet his view was provincial, ignorant of the worth and dignity of his international neighbors. This insularity breeds international distrust, fear, and alienation, the common roots of war. If one good thing came of World War II, it was the end of isolationism on a worldwide scale. What radio and supersonic travel did not achieve in this respect, global conflict did.

The weather has been bad enough to keep the birds walking

Well (as many of George's letters began), this has become a dreary existence during the past few days. There hasn't been a mission in over a week, from this locality. The weather has been bad enough to keep the *birds walking" + I'll bet that they haven't been doing much of that, because the mud has been too thick. So, I've learned to play chess, or I might say that I've gathered a few of the rules so that I can learn to play the game. A good number of the boys are playing it; so Foster + I have been giving it a try.

I had another hour in the instrument trainer, today. I'm always glad for that because I have a desire to become a good instrument pilot. Besides, we may have an opportunity to do some instrument flying while we're in this game. Anyhow, I like instruments, as other fellows hate them. Since I started training, I've got a total of 46 hours of Link Trainer time, all training to fly without reference to the ground. (11/29/44)

*Neilson had explained in a letter that the fliers frequently referred to the planes as birds.

George, ever anxious for action to move forward, tired of languishing at the base. It was not that he longed for combat, so much as it was that he knew he had a job to do, and wanted to get on with it. November expired without the eager young man having flown a combat mission. That was to change in December. And the war itself was about to take a dramatic and surprising turn, as Nazi Germany was on the cusp of a major offensive that it hoped would turn the tide of the war back in its favor in the west. It would claim 19,000 American lives.[17]

L-R Lts. Worth Dunn, Thomas Kiefer, and George Neilson, 15th AAF, Foggia, Italy.

B-17 Flying Fortress Bomber, Amendola air base, Foggia, Italy.

Lt. George Neilson in full flight regalia by B-17 Flying Fortress.

Fifteenth Air Force unit patch

Chapter 16

Combat Missions, December 1944

Amendola Air Base
Foggia, Italy

Runaway War on Balkan Oil

In his book *Forgotten Fifteenth*, Barrett Tillman[1] wrote:

> The Fifteenth Air Force had a priority target: oil. In fact, the Second World War was about oil. The war would not have been possible without it.
>
> The importance of oil had been recognized decades earlier. Shortly after the Great War, the French diplomat Victor Henri Berenger wrote, "He who owns the oil will own the world, for he will rule the sea by means of the heavy oils, the air by means of the ultra-refined oils, and the land by means of petrol and the illuminating oils."

Tillman also offers the view that Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor was intended to neutralize the US Navy's Pacific Fleet while their forces captured the oil resources of the East Indies. "In Asia, as in Europe, oil determined the fate of nations."[2]

During the spring and summer of 1944, the Fifteenth Air Force repeatedly hit oil refineries throughout the MTO: Ploesti, Blechhammer, Vienna, Ruhland, Odertal, Brux, Regensburg, and many others. Each exacted a high price. In April, the Fifteenth lost 205 aircraft, 56 percent more than its previous monthly high of 131 in "Big Week" February.[3] In addition to heavy flak, the Axis made increasingly effective use of smoke screens when under attack. By May 1944, there were 1,900 smoke generators at

Ploesti alone, belching chlorosulfite acid under high pressure into the atmosphere.[4] This moved the air force to use "pathfinders" (radar-equipped bombers). Typically, one or two pathfinders would lead the formation, finding targets that those behind it were to hit. In several instances, American fighter planes were used as high-speed, low-altitude bombers. However, this experiment was soon scrubbed as the losses were unsustainable.[5]

On June 16, 1944, a bomber force striking petroleum facilities at Bratislava in Czechoslovakia and targets in Austria faced over two hundred Luftwaffe fighters, losing forty planes. Such losses were repeated on many missions. In Romania, fighters of the Romanian Air Force, highly skilled pilots flying German-built Messerschmitts, gave the Fifteenth pilots a deadly pursuit. Ploesti was a tough nut to crack, and only by returning repeatedly and concentrating on specific refineries within the complex did the Fifteenth finish it off.[6]

Aboard the heavy bombers and fighter planes alike, there were countless heroic acts by individual fliers. Second Lieutenant David R. Kingsley, a B-17 bombardier with the Ninety-Seventh Group, was hit by eight Me 109s on a mission to Giurgiu, Romania. He gave the wounded tail gunner his parachute when his harness strap could not be found. Kingsley helped Sgt. Sullivan into his chute and out of the plane.

> "Then he told me to bail out," Sullivan recalled. "Before I jumped, I looked up at him and the look he had on his face was firm and solemn. He must have known what was coming because there was no fear in his eyes at all." Crewmembers watched their bomber continue its erratic descent, then fall to Earth at the tiny village of Souhozem, Bulgaria, 150 miles south of Ploesti. Bulgarian troops told captured crewmen that Kingsley's body was found on [the plane's] flight deck.[7]

The oil campaign was working. Gas exports to Germany were reduced from 135,000 tons in December 1943 to about 20,000 in the following June.[8] By then, half of the sixty refineries within range of Foggia had been partly damaged. From April to June, the Fifteenth lost almost 490 bombers and 150 fighters. Seventy other bombers were damaged beyond repair. Summer was worse as the oil campaign escalated.[9] Twinning sent six hundred heavies and 250 fighters to oil sites at Bucharest and Belgrade on July 3. Four days later, 550 heavies hit the Blechhammer complex in the coal-rich eastern Silesia region (now Poland). On July 9, 222 bombers hit the Concordia Vega complex at Ploesti. Six days later, 604 dropped 1,500 tons of bombs on four other refineries there. On each such mission, some fifteen to twenty-five bombers went down. These missions continued relentlessly throughout the summer.[10] In July, the costliest month, 333 Fifteenth aircraft were lost, following 248 in June. With the last mission, flown by crews of the Ninety-Seventh BG on August 19, Ploesti was finished.

The next day, Bucharest fell to the 1.3 million strong advance of the Red Army. Romania changed sides and declared war on Germany. Bulgaria succumbed to the Soviets on September 8. In all, 804 Fifteenth bombers were lost over petroleum targets, 225 at Ploesti alone. General Twinning gave a tribute to the scores of men who died at the infamous refinery complex: "They gave their blood for Hitler's oil. They drove a hard bargain which will never be forgotten."[11]

Horror reigned on the ground during a bombing raid. The following is the account of German ace Major Walther Dahl, a famous Luftwaffe fighter pilot known for shooting down heavy bombers.

> People are running around in panic as bombs rain down. The air is filled with the sound of engines, the bark of the flak guns and the crashing of collapsing buildings. There is a small wood just off the airfield. We jump out and throw ourselves to the ground. After what seems like an eternity the

> sound of the bombers recedes and we drive back to the field to be confronted with some terrible sights. Dead and dying are lying around, mostly civilians. We try to help those still alive. Our accommodation blocks are in ruins, where my room was, just an enormous hole.[12]

Added Tillman, "More than fifty aircraft were wrecked on the field and some three hundred men were killed or wounded."[13]

Special Missions

On August 15, 1944, a Corsica-based Allied invasion force landed on the Mediterranean coast of France, heavily supported by the Fifteenth, which carpet-bombed the German shore batteries and other areas around the Riviera landings. The invasion, historically known as D-Day South, successfully put the army on the ground in Vichy (southern) France, hammering another nail in the coffin of the Third Reich.[14]

In the months that followed, as Balkan states fell to the Allies, a major effort was made to rescue POW fliers held in southeastern Europe. Many heartwarming stories resulted from these missions, which were not without risks. Almost seven thousand airmen were removed from prison camps and mistreatment in the Balkans and returned to Foggia by October. Luftwaffe activity in the region became spotty, and the oil-smashing campaign continued further north. Only Vienna compared to Ploesti with respect to defenses, as flak cannon were moved into the heart of the Reich, and flak replaced the fighter threat to a large degree in Austria, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and eastern Germany.[15]

Meanwhile, special missions were flown to drop supplies and weapons to partisan groups throughout southern Europe. These missions, collectively known as Operation Carpetbagger, were flown mostly at night and were not without casualties. Commandos were parachuted in to help organize partisan units.[16] Northern Italy was still in the German camp when the special operations group dropped supplies to units ahead of the Fifth (US) and Eighth

(UK) armies advancing toward the Po Valley. This area was to have significant meaning for George, whose brother Bob was wounded fighting with the famed Tenth Mountain Division as it was advancing on the Po.

Many of the partisans in Yugoslavia were led by Josip Broz, who became known as Tito, an avowed Communist. To the western Allies, who cooperated with Tito and his guerilla operations, his political bearing was at the time secondary to his usefulness in defeating the Nazis. Tito's partisans also helped repatriate POWs from German internment in Yugoslavia. By October, 1944, 6,941 Allied airmen had been evacuated from the Balkans.[17] After the war, Tito consolidated power in Yugoslavia but, unlike most of the Marxist movements in Eastern Europe, did not align with Moscow.

Throughout the fall, the Fifteenth fanned out over the southern Reich, destroying rail yards, oil installations, and other strategic targets. Blechhammer in Upper Silesia, a huge oil facility capable of making a half-million tons of synthetic oil annually, became a frequent yet formidable target. Fighters were employed in low-level strafing and bombing at rail centers. These pilots got a thrill out of a sport they call "loco busting," firing at locomotives, the steam engines of which created spectacular explosions. Strafing was a controversial business because its targets were almost always random. The German population reacted to this as "aerial terrorism." Yet absent was any recognition that their government had unleashed unbridled terror on the innocent peoples of Europe.[18]

As Luftwaffe fighters thinned out in the fall of 1944, losses followed suit. Compared to 151 Axis kills in August, only 150 were reported for the next four months combined. Kill counting was a serious business, as awards were issued partly on that basis. Some hot pilots were branded as aces, which distinction required a certain number of kills, usually five. By October, some fliers flew fifteen missions without seeing a fighter. At the same time, flak batteries blazed into high gear. On October 4, antiaircraft gunners downed fifteen planes over Munich's marshaling yards.

On November 15, the Fifteenth AF sent its greatest effort to date against a single target to the Florisdorf refinery in Vienna with 720 bombers and 335 fighters. The target was defended by seven German and four Hungarian squadrons from the elite Puma wing of the Royal Hungarian Air Force flying white-crossed Me109s. It was the last encounter the "Italians" had with the Hungarian fliers. "Italians" was the name the Germans gave to Italy-based Allied fliers. In November, the Fifteenth flew thirty-seven missions in support of Soviet ground units in Yugoslavia and Hungary. On one of these, planes of the Eighty-Second fighter group mistakenly shot up a Soviet convoy, resulting in a brief shoot-out between Russian and American fighters. The error was recognized and an explanation offered by the US forces, arguing that the support given in thirty-seven missions would strongly indicate that no hostility was intended.[19]

December missions included lots of strafing and dive-bombing, with heavies continuing to strike at oil targets. Though anticipating only a scattering of Luftwaffe fighters, fifty Me109s and FW190s showed up at Odertal on December 17 during a run on its refinery and the twin petroleum installations at Blechhammer. Twenty bombers went down that day, while German Jagdegescwader 300 wrote off forty fighters. The Germans had funneled all that remained of their fighter force into fuel targets. Another threat emerged that month when guided surface-to-air rockets were observed damaging Liberators. The short-lived Wasserfall (Waterfall) missile was likely involved, a four-ton, twenty-six-foot-long rocket that traveled at 1,700 mph.

Two experimental Lockheed jet-propelled fighters were dispatched to Italy called P-80 Shooting Stars to test their capability against Me262 jet fighters. The same war in which horse-drawn vehicles were used, supersonic, radio-guided rockets, and turbojets were employed. Warfare had become not only frightfully destructive but also very fast and sophisticated.[20]

Thus, as Lt. George Neilson approached the day of his first bombing mission, the skies over Axis territories were yet quite

hostile. If it was not so by swarms of fighters, it was by virtue of bursting flak and new, high-speed, high-tech weaponry.
*German slang for heavy bombers literally translated as *four engine*.

BRIEFING FOR BOMBING MISSIONS

The briefing for each bombing mission was carried out according to the same format. Usually, an enlisted man was sent to each tent of the crew members assigned to fly that day, to wake them up at approximately 5:30 a.m. Then, we got up, washed, shaved and dressed complete with over-the-shoulder pistol (in case we went down and had to fend for ourselves). They usually had a hot breakfast for us at the mess hall. Then, we hopped aboard trucks for a short trip up the road where we went to the Group's "auditorium," actually a farm animal barn that had been cleaned up, with benches provided for about 600 people, the full complement of the Group's strength upon the occasions when the entire group flew together. Usually, the Group assembled at less than full strength due to maintenance and other miscellaneous problems that affected the availability of people and airplanes.

Upon assembly, the Group intelligence officer would reveal the target for the day, often to the response of groans from the assigned flight crews. Then, the Group Operations Officer would outline the details of the mission: distances, routes, altitudes, etc. also where we would converge or rendezvous with other Groups, from other areas of the Command. The description of the target, and any alternates, were outlined: supply depot, railroad marshalling yard, synthetic oil refinery, etc. Then, the Group Commander, usually Colonel or Lt. Colonel, would say a few words as to the importance of the mission. Finally, a priest or minister would say prayer and we would be on our way. Navigators and bombardiers were issued photos of the target area.

After the briefing, the trucks would take us to the flight line. There, we would get our parachute and emergency equipment from an operations building, near the parking area for the planes

belonging to our squadron. Emergency equipment included an oxygen mask and a kit to be used for food and first aid in the event we went down in enemy or friendly territory. There was also an important "K" ration lunch that we would carry along to our assigned position in the airplane. We usually flew on the same plane each trip. Briefing was usually at 6:30. Time for starting engine[s] was 7:15 or 7:30.

One of the "highlights" of the early morning briefings and plane readiness activities might be the shooting up of a flare, near the control tower, that meant the mission for the day was "scrubbed." This was typically for problems of weather interfering with operations. This meant that we could all relax and plan to take the day off. Then, we would visit the U.S.O. Club, in Foggia, the only pleasant place in the area, to spend time. There, we could talk with others, have coffee and cakes, play cards, etc. Oh, yes, very important, there were rations of candy and cookies, gum, etc. that we could purchase. (G.H.N., 1991)[21]

Do you remember Luke, the boy who went through cadets with me who also comes from Medford? His picture is with mine in that block of 4 which came out in the [Boston] Traveler, after I graduated from Blytheville. He was to be an instructor, but they changed their mind + made him a co-pilot on B-17s. Anyhow, he was assigned to this squadron + group. He's now a Prisoner of War in Germany, after having been reported "missing" for a long time. (12/1/44)

This excerpt from his December 3, 1944 letter explains in part why George's letters reveal as much as they do about his daily activities.

Well, I received a letter of yours, Betty, dated Nov. 13, yesterday. I gather that you were surprised as well as interested to see what I was able to tell about in my letters. Remember, casual people need only to know that "I'm in Italy." In fact, if the weather + other factors ever permit my getting started on my missions, I'll report to you as well as I can on them.

They don't care if you tell people where you've been. It's only where you *go that worries them!

Yesterday, I received a letter from Eddie. It was censored, with regards to where he has been since he left Waikiki, in the Hawaiian Islands. He says that there are still Japs on the island that he's on. I also got a change of address card from James Neal, who was with me at Blytheville. He's just leaving Savannah for the South Pacific, I guess, on B-25s. I guess that I told you about another fellow who was in my room at Blytheville, Adolf Nowakowski. He's in England, too! (12/3/44)

*Presumed, *will go*

Commenting on how he has been playing so much bridge and chess, George remarked,

All I need now, is to take up knitting. (12/3/44)

This makes the umpteenth stove arrangement that we've had

Well, the weather was in today per usual: so, there was nothing special to do. However, we managed to change our stove for another arrangement which Foster had a welder prepare for him. This makes the umpteenth stove arrangement that we've had, each one represents a little improvement over the previous one. The feature of the present one is that we have a tin can welded to a bomb stand, with an attached can in which the gasoline burns.

In case you're interested in how we live together in our backwoods organization, Foster is the plumber, the one who fixes the stoves + pipes + invents the new schedules for what we need. Dunn is always asleep, offering a cynical word about what is being done or shining a pair of shoes. While I do the chores: sweep the floors, fill the water cans + keep the gasoline replenished. (12/4/44)

Well, I got off the ground, at last today! There was no combat mission scheduled; but, I flew with one of the "Mickey" planes, loaded with radio equipment, for the purpose of operating in bad weather. The object was to go to 25,000 feet + give the radar man an opportunity to bomb by

instruments. Well, of course, the equipment had to be out of order by the time we got to the bombing range, Pianosa Island, in the Adriatic. Besides, there were a lot of clouds + the airplane wouldn't climb too well, either. All in all, they called it off to come back. The temperature was only 25 degrees below zero today; but, I was dressed warm enough. (12/5/44)

MISSION #1 – ZAGREB, YUGOSLAVIA

Our crew had its indoctrination into WW II on Dec. 6, 1944, when we were on the roster for the mission to Zagreb, Yugoslavia. As you may recall, Yugoslavia was divided into two factions: 1) The Nazi sympathizers, who controlled the urban populations of the provinces of Yugoslavia, and 2) the Partisans, who sided with the Allies. The Partisans were led by Marshall Tito, who in the post-war became the leader of Communist Yugoslavia. The Partisans were rural groups who were in scattered patterns throughout the country. They tried to be helpful to the Allies wherever it was possible. Zagreb was a supply and distribution center, serving the Nazi forces. Our target for Dec. 6 was railroad marshalling yards where many trains are parked together, waiting for dispatch. Zagreb was about 275 miles from Foggia and, fortunately for our first trip, it was not considered one of the "big" targets. The definition of "big" to the bomber pilots usually meant the number of anti-aircraft guns that were stationed surrounding the target area, which were in position to shoot at the bomber formations crossing the target.

Naturally, everything was new on this first mission: the briefing, getting properly into the pre-takeoff lineup so that once off the ground, we could circle properly into formation. [There were] new experiences such as taking off at 30 second intervals, at the demand signal of an operations officer, thus eliminating the pilot's judgment as to when a safe time of takeoff would be, behind the plane ahead. The timely signal of the operations officer had much to do with the effective achievement of a well-timed formation, [of] which complications multiply geometrically as the

organization got larger in the sky. Later, it climaxes in being in the target area at the assigned time.

So, in many respects, the actual flying was a follow-the-leader sequence. The flight to Zagreb was uneventful, northeast across the Adriatic and then across Yugoslavia. We only went to 22,000 ft., lower than the average of most missions on the B-17. When you consider that much of Yugoslavia is mountainous, we were below 20,000 ft. for a considerable length of time. Our group (the 97th) was the only Group assigned to this mission. We saw no enemy or U.S. fighter planes. We made evasive action (twists and turns) to confuse the ground-controlled anti-aircraft guns.

(According to George's post-mission letter, the planes did not drop their bombs due to complete lack of visibility and the fact that the "Mickey" radar in the lead plane was inoperative.)

No matter what or where was the target, while flying heavy bombers as a pilot, you never get a chance to see the target, whether you hit it or what the target looked like. All this was in the perspective of the bombardier only, in the formation. However, cameras were synchronized with the bombsight to take pictures which were later studied by intelligence officers. Sometimes the flight crew would see the pictures, and sometimes we would not. Each squadron's pictures would be dove-tailed with pictures from the other squadrons in the group, for forwarding to higher headquarters for final evaluation of the success of the mission.

Thus, for Mission No. 1, the term "milk run" was the proper term for the day's activity. This term was often applied when there was no damage or losses to friendly aircraft, including the safe return to the base of all flight crew personnel. Going back into family history, the "milk run" was the trip the family milk man made, usually in the early morning, undisturbed and without anything to bother his routine.

On the way home from the mission, there was a natural tendency to relax, though still flying tight formation for safety's sake. The plane was descending, had a lesser load of gas, and

no bombs. The engines sort of "loafed" instead of straining as they did en route "up" to the target areas. A feeling of relaxation, comfort and security [set]-in, [accompanied] by the growth of hunger pains and a need to relieve one's body systems. Most of us aboard took off our oxygen masks at the appropriate time (when we were below 16,000 ft.) and delved into the K-ration food packages. K-rations were only appetizing after a flight mission that had absorbed enough energies to make you hungry for no matter what was in them, usually "spam," crackers, candy, gum, and cheese. This usually came at about 2:00 p.m., after having breakfast at 6:00 a.m.

Having always been blessed with a good appetite, I found that the mission flying seemed to have made me all the more hungry, even for K rations; so, I often ate one or two extra packages, awarded by others on the crew for whom high-altitude bomber flying did not generate much appetite. For this capability, I earned the nickname "Lunchbox" Neilson, aboard the plane.

Upon landing, we always had a brief interview with an intelligence officer, thence back to our squadron tent area. After that, it was generally into the dining hall. As darkness fell, we returned to our tents to wind down and have conversations about the mission. The Zagreb trip was uneventful, but was a good way to work our way into the system of the bomber parades to the various targets yet to come. (G.H.N., 1991)[22]

We were told that we were only to bomb the target if we could see it

I had my first trip out of the "state" today. Call it a mission if you like! I was scheduled to fly with a Lt. Emerson, last night. They briefed us for a short mission up into Yugoslavia, to Zagreb. The purpose of the mission was to hit the railroads marshalling yards, there, which the Germans are reported to be cluttering up, in their retreat from the Russians + the Partisans. Not only that, Zagreb helps to supply the Krauts in Italy.

We were told that we were only to bomb the target if we could see it + not by instruments, because it is too close to the Allied lines to risk

missing the target by a few miles (as they often do). So, they sent us into the wild sky + wild it was, without any fighter protection; because they didn't expect that the Germans could offer any resistance.

Believe me, the sky was filled with clouds, at all altitudes. It was one of those days when they hoped that the planes could penetrate the weather + hoped that the target would be clear. No sooner did we reach 3000 feet, then we were in the clouds + we couldn't even see the plane on whose wing we were flying. Now I'm telling you that is a precarious situation, something they only do in combat when the "mail must go through." Anyhow, there were 7 ships in our squadron to begin with; but, after we left the "soup," we didn't get together again until we were at 10,000 ft. near the group rendezvous point above Lake Lasina. Instead of squadrons meeting, there were planes coming in from all angles, trying to find their lead planes. In the meantime, everybody had been circling blindly through the clouds, hoping to break out. However, everyone was organized by rendezvous time, 11:15 + the outfit left for the target, climbing on course.

We got to 25,000 feet and still no sky! – 45° below zero

When we reached 16,000 feet, we got into a solid bank of cirrostratus clouds + stayed there, except for brief moments for 4 solid hours. Formation flying just isn't done in the clouds, yet we were doing it today. Since we were flying on the left side of the lead plane, I flew the plane most of the time. At times, the plane on our wing would disappear except for the vapor trail which marked its path in the clouds. Believe me, you sweat blood when that happens, knowing there are a bunch of planes around you + not being able to see them. Then, of course, when they make a slight turn, you never seem to roll out of it. At times, the plane seems to be standing on end + you hang on to the controls for dear life, yet it is only flying straight + level. All that comes from flying through the overcast.

Well, we got to 25,000 feet + still no sky! – 45o below zero + the exhausts from the planes were turning to ice + made a whistling trail of flakes behind the plane. As it turned out, the radar equipment in the lead plane of our squadron was inoperative; so he kept checking with our navigator as to where the target was. We reached the initial point, the so-called "I.P." for the bomb-run, but there was nothing to be seen; so,

we turned around + came back. All the while, there were several other planes + squadrons somewhere nearby; but, we couldn't see them. Some of our planes decided not to risk the trip in formation, so, they started to break formation + go home alone! But, 4 of us stayed together + let down across the Adriatic, being joined by a couple of B-24s, whose formations had evidently been scattered, too. Then, we came through an icing layer, where the clouds were loaded with water which froze on the wings. Finally, we broke out of the overcast at 8,000, after 4 hours in the clouds.

So we had taken the bombs for a 950 mile ride

Then, they began talking about dropping bombs in the ocean, to avoid the danger of landing. After a lot of chatter on interphone communication, they decided that the planes with delayed-action bombs would salvo them, while the rest would bring theirs home. Then, there began a splurge of bombs hitting the water from all directions + from above the clouds; and, there we were below it + listening to the bombs whistle by! (But, that's combat.) It developed into a situation where the weather had been too great an obstacle, so, get home in the most practical manner. Of course, there also had to be a thunderstorm to go around, before crossing the Manfredonia Promontory, towards Foggia!

At 3:15, after 6 hours of hectic combat (but just with the weather), we landed on the steel mat, complete with 6000 lbs. of demolition bombs. So we had taken the bombs for a 950 mile ride!

I guess that I'm in for some hair-raising experiences, with weather being more of an enemy than Hitler! It's not fun, but it's experience! Everyone thinks that weather provides the main scares, around here in winter-time.

The thing that keeps you from losing your nerve is the spirit that prevails, despite dangers. For example, while we were in the "soup," someone said, in another plane, "Boy! This is unsafe." Someone else chirped, "You're getting flying pay aren't you?" There's always a lot of laughs! P.S. I was tired, when we landed! (12/6/44).

(See published account of this and Lt. Neilson's other missions in Appendix 1-1.)

Of all the war quotes that exist in the ocean of military history literature, the comment, "Boy! This is unsafe" must be one of the classic understatements. Reflecting on how the war impacted his peers and his own view of life as a struggle, Neilson wrote the next day,

Then, we drifted along, apparently not coming to any realization of what that struggle really is, until this war came upon us, to begin to wake us up. Thus it appears that everyone has some sort of an awakening! (12/7/44)

Next to the date on this letter was written, "Pearl Harbor Day." From that, America's day of infamy, it was recognized that December 7, 1941 was a day that defined a new future for the United States of America. On that day, America's two centuries of isolationism came to an irreversible end. At the same time, December 6, 1944 was the dawn of war for George personally, after which life as he had known it would never again be the same. Continuing the saga, George brought things back to the Mediterranean Theater of Operations (MTO).

This morning, Kiefer and I went up on another instrument practice mission. It seems as if they are preparing us for instrument flying, on single plane, night missions, in which you never see the ground or anything for 7 or 8 hours, while you cruise to Germany + return. Those planes go out at night + attack a given city at 5 or 10 minute intervals, from about midnight 'til dawn. The object is to harass them, keep them awake + in shelters + halt factory production. That is the so-called new plan of attack. The planes have the latest of all equipment. The ones we have flown have each had 10 to 15 radio devices, loaded to the hilt with radar + the newest confidential + secret equipment. Foster has been getting practice with one of the radar machines; but, on a mission we would have a radar operator in addition to our regular crew. With that,

you can roam through the clouds at night + never look at the ground or look out of the plane, after taking off. Radar instruments do the entire job of navigating. (12/7/44)

Many of these so-called Mickey Missions (named for the radar gear which appeared to give the bomber mouse ears) were flown by the 464th Group with three Liberators each. The element of surprise was achieved by the bad weather. Standing orders prohibited the Mickeys from bombing in clear skies.[23]

Not 'til we were ready to land did we discover that there were 4000 lbs. of bombs aboard

Today being the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, I went to mass at the Group's chapel, this evening at 6:30. The chapel, while it has the faint atmosphere of a church, has very little to offer in the way of comfort. The chairs are the tin protectors that come on bomb fins. Then, when you kneel down, you kneel on the concrete floor. Nevertheless, it serves the purpose of a chapel; and, all that's necessary is to have a place called "chapel."

This morning, Kiefer + I went up on another instrument practice mission, of two hours duration. Not 'til we were ready to land did we discover that there were 4000 lbs. of bombs aboard. However, the bombs could never go off, no matter how handled, unless the safety pins were removed. For, bombs can be dropped "safe" from most any altitude.

If you think there are many planes flying around home, you should see the planes over the Foggia area when there's no mission; every group sends its planes up on practice missions. The practice missions are called, "U.S.O." missions. Remember that! So, there's hundreds of bombers cruising around, and P-51s + P-38s, scooting all over the sky, doing about what they please. Even the forts take pleasure in swooping over the Gulf of Manfredonia, coming so low that they tip over all the fishing sailboats. Then, the P-51s are always playing "Follow the Leader" up and down roads!

When we came back this a.m., there was a B-24 out on the edge of the highway, with one wheel in the ditch, as it were a parked auto. In taxiing

to the runway for takeoff, he took the wrong taxiway + went on the road which leads to the highway from the field. (12/8/44)

Flak so thick you could walk on it

On October 13, 1944, the Fifteenth lost thirty-two planes in an 870-plane assault on Vienna and Blechhammer. This was a large number of losses for late 1944. Only a few FW190s mustered that day. What was noteworthy was that all of the lost planes resulted from ground fire. Soale[24] wrote,

> Missions like these where aircrews experienced large amounts of flak proved to be both nerve-racking and difficult. 'Flak so thick you could walk on it' quickly became a common expression used to describe a large amount of flak experienced during a mission. Stress took its toll on those who survived flying in enemy airspace. On most bombing missions, they saw friends bail out of crippled ships or even die as nearby planes burst into flames. Bailing out over enemy territory meant an uncertain future in captivity or even death at the hands of frustrated civilians. It took a special type of person and a close-knit crew to fly a bomber in combat.[24]

Miller[25] stated graphically,

> Some bombers landed with 200 to 300 holes in them and with crewmembers in worse shape than their planes: arms and kneecaps sheared off, eyes blown out of their sockets, torsos torn open so widely that flight surgeons could see the dead men's lungs. With the decline of the Luftwaffe, the percentage of bombers lost on raids dropped, but men still died in big bunches....

> Flak was insidious; it reduced men to a state of complete helplessness—passive stress, Air Force physicians called it. In frustration, gunners would fire at the flak bursts. No one thought they were crazy.

Of flying through flak defenses, George, in his 1991 memoirs, wrote:

Each time that we approached a target, we put on a "flak jacket," an awkward metal-lined garment that was more like a heavy, metal-lined hunting jacket that had the awkwardness, when sitting down, of a baseball umpire chest protector. Then, we put a metal battle helmet over our flight helmet. We already had our eyes covered with goggles and our mouths covered with oxygen masks. We wore the helmet and flak jackets while we were on the bomb-run over the target. We took them off only after clearing the target area. At Regensburg, we could observe the carpet of black smoke made by the exploding shells, in layers above us as well as layers below us. This gave evidence that the anti-aircraft gunners kept changing altitudes, in their trial-and-effort to find the level of the bombers. The smoke carpet above the altitude that your plane reached provided the most food for thought since obviously, the shells were coming up "through" the bomber parade: so, one's mental fix would be an almost certainty that something would have to hit your plane, especially when you could see the shells exploding like eggs being broken over the edge of a frying pan on the stove. This situation probably provided the biggest mental challenge to bomber pilots since as you went down the bomb-run, on a follow-the-leader basis, there was not much you [could] do to dodge the situation. You had to take what was coming and hope and "pray" that things would be okay.

These were the thoughts you experienced each day, as you started down the bomb-run. You always were with the impression that the anti-aircraft people knew where you were, by altitude and direction, judging by what you could see in front of you. So, as

you started down the bomb-run with the bombardier in the lead plane in front of the group, in control of the flight, there could be no evasive action and no choice but to follow a straight and level trajectory across the target area. The bombs were always released on cue from the lead plane. Thus a 2, 3, or 4 minute bomb run provided a mental battle for each crew member, especially for the pilots who could see what was happening in the way of flak and intrusion from enemy fighter planes. (G.H.N., 1991)[26]

MISSION #2 – REGENSBURG

On Dec. 9, we got our second opportunity to be indoctrinated into the ways of the air war. The target was at Regensburg, a medium-sized city on the Elbe River in South-Central Germany. This time it was about a 650 mile trip, which meant about 650 miles in the air. The actual target was a huge supply depot. The weather was clear. We flew to an altitude of 27,000 ft., an altitude typical of many of our missions. Regensburg is in a vicinity south of Munich, one of Germany's major cities. There was briefed to be about 250 anti-aircraft guns around the target area, a major target. That day, we observed other groups ahead of us, apparently headed for the same area. When we observed other planes, they were B-24s, as 80% of the bombers in the 15th Air Force were B-24s.

As we went over the target on this clear day, we got our first view of "flak," the bursting in the air from the shells of the 88 millimeter guns, the mainstay of the German anti-aircraft artillery.

We dropped fifteen 500 lb. bombs (typical load) onto the German supply depot at Regensburg. As we came off the target, nobody in our group seemed to have been hit by flak. Our crew members, notably the waist-gunners who had the best view, did see some German Me109 (Messerschmitt) fighters off in the distance, apparently stalking the B-24s, at a lower altitude. The trip home, across the Alps, close to Switzerland, was uneventful. As was the case on the trip "up" over the Alps Mountains to the target areas, so was the trip on return "down" over the mountains usually peaceful. Often, we were dropping in altitude as we approached

the vicinity of Venice, at which time we could take off our oxygen masks and "enjoy" (I usually did) lunch. But, we always stayed in formation, from the time we took off and circled over the base en route, until the time we returned, circled and took our turn to land. The Regensburg trip made me feel that I was really "into it," because it was typical of the full-distance trip into Germany, to a major target. None of the planes got seriously hit that day. (G.H.N., 1991)[27]

"Red Letter Day"

Well, today was a momentous day, both for me + the 97th Bomb Group!! For me, it was the first penetration over German soil, while for the 97th it was their 400th combat mission. They, the original heavy outfit to bomb by daylight, are the first heavy bombardment unit to have participated in 400 missions. (12/9/44)

The 97th BG was one of the charter units of the Eighth Air Force, deploying to Grafton-Underwood (East Anglia) on July 6, 1942.

On August 17, 1942 the 97th became famous for flying the first 8th Air Force heavy bomber mission of the war and dropping the first bombs on the Rouen-Sotteville Marshaling yards in France.

In September, the 97th was withdrawn to North Africa to the Mediterranean Theater of Operations to become a part of the 12 AAF. A year later, in November 1943, the 97th Bombardment Group became a part of the 15th AAF. They were stationed at Guilla Airdrome, Cerignola, Italy from December 20, 1943 until Sunday, January 16, 1944 when the 97th HQ arrived at Amendola Airfield. The next day they were followed to Amendola by the 414th Bomb Squadron with their B-17s. Amendola became the permanent home in Italy for both the 97th and the ASAAF 2nd Bomb Groups.[28]

It all began with briefing, at 5:30, this morning, when the intelligence officer began the proceedings. For the occasion, the 97th was to lead the entire air force of 750 bombers in a maximum effort against *Brux, which is at present the highest priority target on the European continent. For, Germany's greatest synthetic oil refineries are located there. In order to insure an important operation, all the alternate targets were A-1 priority affairs too!

Col. Ohman, group C.O. + a West Pointer, was to lead it all. I was with Lt. Jurgens, a veteran of 43 missions. But, we were the squadron's spare, to stand by in case some ships couldn't make the formation. So, we waited on the ground while all the squadrons + groups were circling for rendezvous, until a ship called in + said it was experiencing difficulty + would have to turn back. The tower then told us to take off + where to catch the group. So, we hi-tailed it + climbed up in time to catch the group as it left the rendezvous point, heading across the Adriatic!

We were chasing only shadows and vapor trails through the mountains of invisibility

Soon, we were in formation, climbing on course. Soon, again, we were in clouds, that dreaded maneuver of flying formation in clouds which the Air Corps has sanctioned in order to get through to the targets. We were chasing only shadows + vapor trails through the summit-less mountains of invisibility – clouds, to you. For over an hour, we hardly ever saw the other planes. When we were at 22,000 feet, we saw a few glimpses of the majestic snow-clad peaks of the Tyrolean Alps!

Then, after circling + climbing for a while, the Colonel left the "Key Point" + began the penetration into **"Deutschland." By this time, we were at 27,000 feet, 5 miles up, + the temperature was 50° below zero, Centigrade or 67° below zero, Fahrenheit, which is much colder than it gets at either of the poles. Now, the weather was clear, with the ground completely obscured by undercast.

As we crossed over the horizon of clouds, hundreds of American fighters could be seen, dog fighting + playing tag over the skies of Germany. Everywhere, you could see vapor trails of the Mustangs + Lightnings as

they dove + chased one another, in playful antics, providing themselves with their only amusement of the day!

Meanwhile, the "big birds" flew on. Unbeknown to us, they decided that they couldn't reach Brux + turned off to bomb the often-blasted industrial town of Regensburg! All I know is that the colonel's plane started a slow turn towards the south, + opened its bomb doors. Everyone else followed suit, which the engineer quickly presented Jurgens + I with "Flak Suits," to protect us against inevitable enemy anti-aircraft fire! However, we evidently caught them flat-footed; for, not a burst of flak was to be seen as the formation wheeled down the bomb run, and the "eggs" eventually fell through the clouds. The atmosphere here was like being in a snow-covered field on a sharp winter morning, when the weather had cleared + the sky was deep blue. So, at 11:55, the load was delivered + my No. I sortie over Germany was intact! Then, the formation headed towards home, dodging scattered flak that had arisen like stirred-up dust, once the target had been hit.

We were low on oxygen and knew we'd have to leave the group

The next problem, to go 700 miles home. Everyone leaned out their gasoline mixture + hoped that they could start down + relieve the diminishing oxygen situation! However, it became apparent that they'd have to try to fly over the "soup," at least to the Adriatic, because it would be hard to dodge the fighters + flak, in the stuff, in formation.

Well, we were low on oxygen + knew we'd have to leave the group + make that treacherous journey across "Yugo," alone! We stuck it out, 'til our warning lights were on in the system. Then, we got the navigator to determine when we had passed over the Alps, before we bade the group "goodbye" + started down, alone. Jurgens was just as happy that I flew the instruments + he let me take us through the soup, alone + in the clouds for 1 ½ hours, letting down at 500 feet each minute. Finally, we found a hole in the lower clouds + broke out into the clear, just beyond the harbor of Venice, enemy held, + protected by fighters! There we were at only 6,000 feet, dodging clouds + trying to remove the ice from the instrument panel, which had formed on the ice-box-like plane, as it came into the warmer

air. Meanwhile, the window was iced + we were really in a jam, until we could scrape the ice away, all this time within gun-shot of Venice!

A 1300 mile trip, 6,000 lbs. of bombs, behind us

Finally, + slowly, the plane + its crew began to adjust itself + rid themselves of the rigors + privations of sub-zero conditions at high altitude! Meanwhile, the navigator plotted our course home, dodging enemy installations down the coast. Then, we all moved around, ate some K rations, drank a cup of coffee, (ahem) took a _____! + waited for the Italian spur + Foggia to loom on the horizon.

So, at 3:30, the wheels rolled to a stop on the new black top runway, at the end of which waited the flight surgeon + 7 ambulances + the Catholic Chaplain (all out of daily procedure). A 1300 mile trip, and 6,000 lbs. of bombs, behind us! As we taxied by, I gave the chaplain the wave + he greeted us with a broad smile! And thus, finis to my 1st sortie + the 97th 400th, a historic day in my life as well as that of the 97th B.G.

Well, I must go to bed, + get ready to fly with Kiefer, at last, tomorrow! If we had gone to Brux, I would now be somewhere in Yugoslavia, for we would never have had sufficient gas, to return! Ma, you should see the weather. You, or maybe even Giovonni, would never dream that planes could penetrate it, yet, that just illustrates progress, advancement, etc.

P.S. 1. I'm now a veteran of combat!!! 2. Thank God that Miss Hogan made those socks out of real wool. (12/9/44)

*Brux was in Czechoslovakia

**German for *Germany*

(See Appendix I-2)

Well, I was up again this morning! I flew with our own crew at last, except for Conway who has been grounded with a head cold! The target was supposed to be Brux, once again. They frequently make Brux the primary target, if there's any possibility of getting to it. For, it is the highest priority target on the continent. Both the eighth + the 15th air forces go after the oil refineries frequently. It is hard to hit because it is at the extreme end of the range of either air force. Its position near the

Czech border in eastern Germany makes it accessible when the weather + wind are favorable, only.

The soup became thicker and thicker, until it was impossible to see the other planes

After experiencing difficulty with our interphones + our V.H.F. radio, we managed to get off in time to join the formation. The weather was dark + rainy + it looked impossible that they might penetrate the clouds. Yet, the colonel who led the group seemed determined to get the formation into the war. Well, we sweated out the penetration into the clouds, as they circled towards rendezvous. The soup became thicker + thicker, until it was impossible to see the other planes. So, we had to go up by ourselves + hope to meet the group at rendezvous.

We didn't reach the top until we were at 20,000 feet. Then, we searched vainly for the balance of the planes. We thought that perhaps we had been the only ones to break out + we would be reprimanded for losing the formation + returning. Finally, we got radio contact with our squadron's lead plane. He said that what was left of the formation was only at 6,000 feet over the island at Vis (in the ocean). They had dropped down instead of climbing! We were advised that the mission had been scattered + to return home, dropping our time bombs into the ocean, because they're too dangerous to bring back. So, we had to find a place to let down through the most solid 15,000 ft. deep layer of clouds [where] we had been at rendezvous, only 20 miles from Foggia. By the time we could get below it, we were over the Albanian coast [south of] Yugoslavia. Then, we had to fly at 1500 feet, across the Adriatic, dodging thunderheads, all the way.

We hadn't seen land for 3 hours, first at altitude, then over water. Foster did a beautiful job of navigating us down the middle of the Adriatic + across to Foggia. Since we had only 1500 ft., he had to bring us around the spur which has mountains up to 5,000 feet, especially since we could not see out the windows. By using his radio compass, he brought us right over the field, having avoided the mountains by a wide margin. Believe me, it was tedious + very nerve-wracking to be on instruments. You can get an idea of how bad the weather was, when you note that it took us

3 hours to go 20 miles + we had to travel 300 miles, in order to do it. Weather! Weather! Weather! That's all I ever fly in.

So, the idea of a mission, today, was a total loss. However, if the formation could have penetrated the clouds, we could have continued for Brux, over the "top!" You see, they're trying like mad not to let weather interfere with operations. I hope that God will prove to them that it can't be done, without too many fellows being hurt. (12/10/44)

He could see sheets of flame and smoke 10,000 feet high

Try to get the scene if you can: I am sitting on the floor in the officer's mess hall, beside the gasoline stove which gives out a faint glimmer of light. The strange location for writing a letter is because the electrical system just blew out. Right behind me, on a table with my flashlight trained on them, Kiefer + Foster are engrossed in a great mental battle which evolves from their game of chess! Back in another room, there's a poker game going on, by the light of another gasoline stove. Back in that, Dunn + another bombardier are busy reviving themselves on some old bombing formula, filling reams of paper with their calculations.

The boys went to an oil refinery north of Vienna, today, but, it was a small raid, only 7 ships from each squadron. One captain said that he saw Vienna proper, after the "boxcars" (B-24s) hit it. He said that he could see sheets of flame + smoke 10,000 feet high + actually felt sorry for the people at Vienna! (12/11/44)

The oil campaign was yielding visible results. Oil output from the region had been reduced by ninety percent from that of the previous December. Also, troop movements by truck became more frequent as rail yards were ruined. This prevented rapid troop movement from northern Italy to Belgium during the December Ardennes campaign (Battle of the Bulge), where the enemy's fuel shortage from the oil campaign was most dramatically demonstrated. As the Soviet front overran the Nazis in the Balkans and Hungary, the oil attacks in these countries were discontinued, although the refineries were badly damaged or obliterated already.

The Fifteenth had more success with radar bombing than the Eighth by factor of two. The Fifteenth had achieved a hit rate of seventy percent, determined by number of bombs that struck within a thousand feet of the targets.[29]

It took him 2 months, walking through the mountains of Northern Italy

This afternoon, we had to listen to the experiences of an infantry captain who was captured, two years ago, at Anzio + then broke out of a German Prison Camp. It took him 2 months, walking through the mountains of Northern Italy + making contact with Yugoslav partisans + Italians who are pro-Allied!

I have been reading a book of Kiefer's. It was written by a Sam Gordon who is the Pacific Coast authority on bridge. (12/13/44)

Another day has passed + the rain grows deeper + deeper so that I don't see how they'll ever be able to get the planes out of the ruts that they must be in out there. Today, the wind has blown so fiercely that it looked, on several occasions that the roof was going to blow off of our ostentatious abode!

This afternoon, I waded out onto the main highway, jumped on the back of an R.A.F. truck + went into Foggia to secure my rations.

This evening, Kiefer, Dunn, Foster + I got into a heated argument about our own particular philosophies of life: how we expect to live the future, etc. Kiefer + I couldn't agree on any point. (Of course, he loves to argue as much as I do.) It seems as if he had to bring himself up by working as a farm hand in Pennsylvania. He learned to save for a rainy day, which came once a week, and he spent it all. He never believed in saving for the future. He likes to wear dress clothes + go to full-dress affairs all the time. He couldn't see my way of saving + not being on the run all the time. Then, Dunn had very little to offer. Coming from a town of 150 people in Mississippi, he had had very little contact with society before he entered the army. So, when he chimes in, he always has some home-spun farm style statement to make. He does not know what a full dress suit looks like, I don't think. Naturally we all take great pride in being able to kid Dunn

about the size of the town he comes from, Winborn, Mississippi. Dunn is like a good natured little boy to the rest of us! (12/14/44)

The main generator for the tent lights was burned out a few nights ago; so, with a consequent over demand on the candle supply we have only the glimmer of our Foggia-style "silent glow" blast furnace stove to write by.

For the sake of enlightening you a bit, I might mention the make-up of our squadron organization, in case you'd be interested to help visualize what an air force squadron is like.

Commanding Lt. Col. Shafer
Executive Officer *Major Pardue
Adjutant *Captain Ferris (Harvard Man)
Intelligence Officer *1st Lt. Wallenborn

Engineering Officer:	Armaments:	Communications:
*Capt. Robertson	*Lt. Salveterra	*Lt. Shwartz
Mechanics for each of 20 B-17s in the squadron	a. Bomb crews b. Gun mechanics	Radio mechanics

Operations Officer	Mess Officer
Captain Shelton	*Lt. Marshall
25 combat crews	mess personnel

* = "ground gripper"

(12/14/44)

I got an hour in the Link Trainer, today, practicing like mad, now that I know what good they are. Some fellows regard the Link as a waste of time; but, I am a firm believer in the value it has in perfecting a fellow's procedure in instrument flying.

They've finally got a ping –pong table together around the club; and, everyone is breaking their neck to get in line + play. I like Ping-Pong as you know; but, I haven't played much since I've been in the army. Maybe

I'll be able to repair the proficiency I had when I used to play Eddie all the time at the boat club! (12/15/44)

The Battle of the Bulge

At the end of 1944, the German high command had two fundamental problems. First, they were losing the war on all fronts. Second, they were running out of fuel. In a final, desperate attempt to reverse the tide of war, ignoring the advice of his commanders, Hitler ordered a massive troop build-up in the Eifel Mountains opposite the Ardennes Forest of Belgium and France. The force of 250,000 troops with nine hundred tanks and over one thousand heavy artillery pieces stretched for sixty miles along the Ardennes. Air support was to move fighters from Adolf Galland's "Great Blow" scheme. So, instead of a Great Blow in the air, it would be a land battle. The plan was to drive westward into the Ardennes and capture the port of Antwerp, which was the main port of Allied supply into the western front. If it succeeded, this would divide the British and Canadian from the American armies. The intent was that the Allies would sue for a negotiated peace, whereupon Hitler could concentrate on defeating the *Bolsheviks, rapidly advancing on Germany's eastern flank. To obtain fuel for the campaign, the Wehrmacht would capture Allied fuel supplies. Hitler also banked on bad weather and the element of surprise.

The Allies, after moving with lightning speed across France, had been stalled for months on the Siegfried line, the western border of Germany, waiting for the supply lines to be rebuilt and catch up with Patton's ground forces. Allied intelligence regarding the German build-up in the Ardennes was ignored. The great battle opened with a thunderous artillery barrage in the predawn hours of December 16. The German line moved quickly. Defense lines broke down. The offensive penetrated deep into the dense forest. Heroic US rifle units held out in deep snow and zero-degree weather, delaying the blitz enough for a quarter-million American reinforcements under Eisenhower and Patton to come up to relieve the embattled front.

Hitler won the first two points of his three-way gamble (surprise and bad weather). On December 23, the weather cleared, and the Eighth Air Force put up an armada of 20,000 airmen against Luftwaffe airfields and communications centers. Destruction of the railroad junctions stymied the Wehrmacht advance, wrecking roads, bridges, and rail lines, preventing fresh German troops from reaching the front.

On January 1, 1945, the Germans launched eight hundred fighters (fifty minutes after celebrating the new year) in a counterattack, wrecking 450 US planes on the ground. The Luftwaffe lost four hundred planes and 237 pilots, ruining the great assault. Of this, the greatest single catastrophe the Luftwaffe would suffer, Galland said, "In this forced action we sacrificed our last substance."[30] British and US fighters raked German Panzer (tank) units, stalled for lack of fuel, and the attack became a rout for the Allies. Many German units surrendered; the rest abandoned their vehicles and literally ran back toward Germany as the offensive collapsed.

The Battle of the Bulge (so named because of the shape of the German salient) was the largest and costliest battle fought to date by the US Army. It was essentially an American operation on the Allied side, with 82,000 US casualties: 19,000 killed, 40,000 wounded, and 23,000 captured or missing. There were 1,408 British casualties. The Germans suffered some 100,000 casualties, almost half of their troop strength in the campaign. Hitler's last major offensive had failed. By the dawn of 1945, the German forces were substantially spent. Dwindling fuel supplies and the Wehrmacht's inability to replenish its exhausted troops by rail were dramatic manifestations that the bombing of oil and rail targets was working.

The Allied victory prevented the Germans from reaching Antwerp and thwarted the Axis' hopes of a victory and turning the tide of the war. The Germans pulled back behind the Siegfried line. Never again would Hitler mount another major offensive. With the last stand of serious German aggression halted, the way was

open for the unleashing of destruction on the German homeland to a degree unparalleled in the annals of warfare.[31]

The defeat in Belgium marked the end of a year that, through horrific battles in the air and on land, saw the tide turn toward the Allied cause. The new year marked the beginning of the end of the dark night of Nazism in Europe.

**Bolshevik* was the original name of Lenin's Marxist-Communist revolution that toppled the Russian czars in 1917. The terms Bolsheviks, Soviets, and Russians tend to be used synonymously in WWII history.

MISSIONS #3, #4, & #5: BRUX, BLECHHAMMER, BRUX

These 3 missions came in sequence, for our crew. They occurred on Dec. 16, 17, and 25 (Christmas Day). These were the most feared targets in the sphere of the 15th Air Force, during my tour of duty. These were the primary "S.O.R." (Synthetic Oil Refineries). They were located at the far reach of the range of the Model B-17G that we flew, about 750 miles from Foggia. They were located in the eastern [German] province called "Silesia," in rural areas. So dear was the availability of oil to fuel the Luftwaffe, the Panzer tank divisions and the motorized aspects of the rest of the Nazi "Axis" forces, these targets were surrounded by as many as 400 anti-aircraft guns each. They were within 50 miles of each other.

Since they were relatively isolated, the German anti-aircraft forces could easily determine if the bombers were going there, as there were no other significant targets in the region.

So, when the briefing officer announced the target destination, the groans from the personnel were all the more emphatic. Why? All of the above-indicated factors combined to generate giant, psychological fear factors in the minds of the air crews. For, it was always certain th[at] the bomb run would be "rough." For, at most targets, the approach of the bomber "parade" was designed to disguise which target was being attacked, until the last few minutes before lining up on the bomb-run.

It should be pointed out that in war time military flying of bombers, the biggest problem for the air crew members were mental, derived from anticipation of being shot at by enemy aircraft or anti-aircraft guns, (typically 88 millimeter or 120 millimeter guns), during the limited amount of time when your plane was on the bomb-run. At this point, you had to fly straight ahead, and level, on a path controlled by a bombardier in another (lead) plane, during which time there would be no opportunity to do evasive action for the purpose of controlling one's destiny. So, a supplemental mental hazard was the thought of going to a major target where the opposition was "known" to be overwhelming, where it was easy to conclude that the enemy knew you were coming. Such was the scenario surrounding these two major targets.

On the first run to Brux, our group (the 97th) was in the middle of the bomber "parade" or "stream" that approached the target, under the "maximum effort" concept that applied to these targets. For these targets, a major portion of both the B-17s and the B-24s in the air forces were assigned to this target. This meant that the stream consist[ing] of a "parade" of 14 squadrons, combined into 56 plane groups, would pass over the target area, each group with a certain piece of the target to hit, in a steady flow over the target area, for as much as a 45 minute period, sometimes. This pattern offered the Germans an excellent opportunity to adjust their gunfire to higher and to lower altitudes, in an effort to hone in on the proper altitude to hit the planes. So, if your group was towards the end of the parade, you felt that probably it was a certainty that you would get hit.

As far as the flying was concerned for such long missions as to Brux and Blechhammer, it was desirable for the lead planes to climb slowly, using the propellers in low pitch and the fuel mixture leaned-out in order to conserve fuel en route to the target areas. Thus, it seemed that as we passed over the Alps Mountains, we were sometimes not too far over the peaks due to the more gradual climb-up. Also, being wintertime, there were usually cloud masses over the Alps because the Mediterranean Air Mass converged

with the Polar Air Mass and made frontal weather zones. We did considerable cloud-dodging, as it is necessary to stay visible with the adjoining planes when flying in formation. Naturally, for the same reason, visibility had to be good, at altitude, to make a worthwhile trip over a target.

Also, it was necessary for all the groups to arrive at the target area at the assigned times so that the attack could take place within a measured time span since the fighter planes assigned to protect the bombers over the target could only spend a limited time, based on fuel supply (smaller, fast-fuel consuming planes).

In protecting the bombers, the fighter planes were assigned in 3 waves. One group would escort the bombers en route to the target, then return to base. A second group would fly directly from the base to the target area and circle the target area until the bombing mission had been completed by the various groups, then return to base. The third wave would fly to the target for the purpose of escorting the planes out of enemy territory. In our theater, they would usually leave us while we were over the Alps Mountains, after which there was no threat from enemy action.

With the above indicated background, we made the long trip to Brux on Dec. 16. Our plane usually flew as #3 in the squadron, right off the right wing of the lead plane. There were usually 12 to 14 planes in the squadron formation, depending upon the effectiveness of day-to-day maintenance. With two pilots aboard, we took turns flying the plane. Over the course of hours, formation flying became tedious. With proper breaks from relieving each other, fatigue or tension did not become a critical problem. Our group was certainly not the first to arrive at Brux, since it was obvious that the carpet of smoke in the air indicated that other groups had preceded us.

Our group leader set up considerable evasive action to avoid the anti-aircraft fire, regularly referred to as "Ack-Ack" (relating to the sound that you could hear, if you were on the ground). The evasive action would distort the calibrations of the gunners who were certainly tracking our planes. We were at 25,000 ft. as we headed down the bomb-run. This time the straight and level run

was 3 minutes (a rather long run). However, this target was so vital that the leaders were anxious to not leave without a good result. Finally, when the bombs were released, we all peered out from under the helmet and squirmed awkwardly in the strictures of the flak jackets. The planes leaped up, probably 50 ft., as the load suddenly left the bomb bay.

The squadron peeled off the target in a sudden, declining turn to the left and, at the same time, did additional evasive action in an effort to avoid being tracked as we moved away from the target. Then [we] re-formed the orderliness of the formation for the start of the trip home—south through [present day] Poland, Czechoslovakia, Austria and across the Austrian and Italian Alps. In the entire mission, several planes went down. You never know whether they landed safely, or where they landed. The flak from 400 guns had been intense. Our plane was peppered with fragment holes underneath each wing and the fuselage; but, there was no problem in being in good enough shape to return to base. En route home, we leaned-out the fuel mixture, reduced the power and maintained formation. Being in formation was always part of the security blanket of a bomber over enemy territory. Then, as we came down over Italy, towards the end of the 8-hour flight, the K-rations were, once again, as welcome as a king's feast. It is always satisfying to find yourself at the safe end of a long, treacherous journey.

The trip to Blechhammer, the next day, Dec. 17, was a mirror image of the flight to Brux: same dimensions of a target with the same amount of enemy anti-aircraft (Ack-Ack), in addition to guns from fighter planes. Because the mission occurred the next day, it seemed longer. We got about the same results. Bear in mind that as part of the bomber formation, we never got to see the bombs actually hit the ground. We had to wait to see the pictures provided by the intelligence officers, often a few days after the mission.

The mission to Brux, on Christmas Day, was naturally emotional. On Christmas Day, the reasons for being emotional pile up quickly: away from home, thoughts of your family, flying a dangerous mission on a holiday, all causes for reflection. Of course,

the Germans added to the melancholy feelings by playing songs like "White Christmas" with Bing Crosby singing, as we ventured our way towards the target. We, of course had radios that we could use to traverse the various stations that were broadcasting in our path. But, the strategic S.O.R. (Synthetic Oil Refineries) had become critical for the strategic bombers from both England and Italy. Thus, Christmas Day became just another work day. Once again, the distance, the routing, the psychology of the mission was the same, a maximum effort involving some 300 to 400 planes from the 15th Air Force, all going to one target to arrive within approximately a ½ hour period. This time, we went a little higher, to 28,000 ft., about as high as they ever assigned us to fly in B-17s. But, height was not necessarily a security blanket. The planes could possibly go in at a lower altitude and be safe. In fact other groups were assigned at lower altitudes. It was all dependent upon to what degree we had, somehow, been able to deceive the anti-aircraft gunners on the ground, so that they could not effectively track the path of the bomber parade.

On the Christmas Day mission, the 97th Bomb Group was the last to get to the target area, according to the plan. Meanwhile, our plane developed a problem en route to the target, as a supercharger in our #3 engine failed, thus lowering the power output of that engine. As we crossed Czechoslovakia, we began to lose speed and drop back from the formation. We determined that by dropping 2 bombs, we could compensate and catch up with the formation. Otherwise, it would be very dangerous to fly alone, deep over enemy territory, wherein you would be prey to German fighter planes. That worked out as we dropped 2 bombs harmlessly into farm country.

Perhaps, on no other occasion did I observe such a pall of black smoke, appearing like a black carpet, seemingly right at our altitude level as we crossed the target area. It seemed like it would be impossible to get through without being hit, especially as they had all the earlier arriving planes to practice on before our group, the last, came along. Yet, we got through after a long, 4 minute bomb run during which the individual plane has no control; so all

you can do is hope during the bomb-run period. Once again, when we got back we found the plane peppered with holes that were easily patched, to make the plane ready for the next day.

The greatest satisfaction and pleasure of that day was that Lt. Col. Bob Schaffer, our squadron commander, held Christmas dinner for the entire organization until the "birds" (planes from the day's mission) got home. We had a pleasurable and hearty Christmas dinner that evening, tired as we were from two "maximum efforts" in two days. (G.H.N., 1991)[32]

FRAMEWORK OF STRATEGIC BOMBING IN EUROPE

As previously noted, the 15th Air Force stationed in Italy hit targets in Eastern Europe: Yugoslavia, Italy, Hungary, etc. There were 5 bomber wings in the 15th Air Force. All but one wing, in Italy, was made up of B-24 bombers. The one wing, the "Fifth Wing" was made up of B-17s. There were usually 3 groups in each wing. Our 97th Bomb Group was one of *3 groups in the 5th Wing.

In England, there were 12 wings of heavy bombers, of which 75% were B-17s. This made up a major part of the 8th Air Force which hit targets in Western Europe and the Baltic countries.

Also, there were tactical air units. In Italy, there was the 12th Air Force that had the medium bombers, dive bombers and other planes to carry out missions in close support of the ground troops. In England, there was the 5th Air Force, which also did medium bomber work. These tactical air units had such planes as the famous B-25, the (Billy) Mitchell Bomber, the B-26 Marauder, the A-20 Attack Bomber, and the P-47 Dive Bomber.

Out of England, the Royal Air Force had bombers and fighters that had a great mission in the early days of the war. The "Battle of Britain" was a defensive activity carried out when Britain was in danger of being beaten. You will remember such names as "Spitfire" and "Hurricane" and Britain could develop a maximum effort.

In addition to the fighters, the Royal Air Force had memorable and efficient bombers like the "Wellington," nicknamed the

"Wimpy" and the "Lancaster." Then, there was a medium bomber called the "Mosquito" which was made from plywood. There were others. The big manufacturers were Sopwith and Hawker-Siddeley. Furthermore, perhaps the most famous fighter plane in the entire war was the North American P-51 "Mustang." It was regarded as the most efficient general purpose fighter plane in the war. The engines eventually became the Rolls-Royce-Merlin in-line engine, which put this plane over the top as a performer. Most of the British bombers flew single missions, not in formation, and mostly at night. So, the combination of American Bombers during the day and the British at night kept the Germans and Italians busy 24 hours each day.

Operating from southern Italy were B-25 and B-26 bombers that went after bridges and close-in targets in support of the advancing ground forces of the 5th Army.

The planes that generally accompanied our bomber missions were: 1) the P-51 Mustang, the workhorse of the fighter planes, and 2) the P-38 Lightening, a twin-boom, twin-engine fighter manufactured by Lockheed Aircraft.

I believe that the entire armada of available aircraft for the total European Theater of Operations was **10,000 planes, all types included. (G.H.N., 1991)[33]

*According to Tillman,[34] there were six B-17 bombardment groups in the Fifth Wing. Most wings had four groups, while one, the Forty-ninth BW, had three

**Depending on which planes were counted and when, the actual figure was several times this amount.

We had a formidable opponent, in fact the most dreaded in all Europe

The scene in our humble but cheerful little club room borders on exuberance + delight + rejoicing tonight! It is as if we had won the big football game of the season. For, it was Saturday + we had a formidable opponent, in fact the most dreaded in all Europe, at present, one which the 8th Air Force "glamour boys" + the 15th are continually trying to knock over. It was Brux, Germany's most potent synthetic oil refinery. The big

thing about it is that we reached it and hit it!! If only the reconnaissance pictures were here to prove it!!!

You see, Adolf has his oil refineries all placed strategically in *western Germany, just on the outer limit of the range of either the 8th or the 15th. Therefore, perfect conditions of wind + weather must prevail or the bombers will never be able to penetrate + withdraw with enough gas to return home. To that end, they very often put Brux as the primary target, just hoping for the conditions to be favorable. Brux [in Czechoslovakia], Blechhammer, Leuna, Regensburg, + **Merseburg are all in that category. They are all between 650 + 700 miles from either Britain or Italy.

Well, today was the day! I flew with Kiefer + the crew except Foster who flew in another plane + Dunn who did not fly. They woke us at 3:30 a.m. for briefing at 5:00. At briefing, there was a possibility of a "milk run," to bomb the rail yards at Verona in northern Italy, which the Krauts control. But, that depended on the results of the weather plane which goes out in wee wee hours.

Anyhow, we took off at 7:00 as the 97th was leading the 5th wing. Being the first group off the ground, we circled until 9:00 before wing rendezvous took place. Kiefer + I were slated as spare, to fill in for whoever could not meet the formation. However, we found ourselves in No. 5 position before rendezvous ever took place!

Anticipating the long haul, we had the fuel mixture leaned out as far as possible, with the R.P.M of the engines low enough so that we could barely climb + stay in position. For a change, the weather was good as we left Lake Lesina + Termoli on that old 350o heading. In the middle of Austria, the Group lead plane caromed to one side, abruptly + then feathered his No. 4 engine out. The colonel had to relinquish his lead position because he couldn't maintain his air speed + keep the flight plan. In the resultant shuffle of positions, over Germany by this time, we shot into No. 2 position. There we were in a coveted spot, flying on the wing of the deputy group lead ship.

The sky was turned inside out with thundering bursts of those dreaded shells

To make a long story short, the "Mickey" man, or the radar man, in the new lead plane took charge, for it was his radar which was to direct

us to the "initial point" and down the bomb-run. So, Conway brought us our flak suits + we made ready for the bomb-run. Soon, the lead plane was making a slight turn to the right. Then, as he got to a heading of 64o, we knew that we were close to Brux, and its 350 anti-aircraft guns (flak guns). As the bomb doors fell open, the waist gunners started dropping their "chaff," a contra-radar device used to fool the anti-aircraft listening devices. Then, at the precise moment when the "Mickey Man" had the key distiller of the Brux oil refinery in his radar screen, away went the demolition + delayed action bombs, down, down, through the clouds! Everyone dropped their bombs instantaneously, when Mickey dropped his + the doors rolled shut + we started the rally for the return journey. Being the first group over the target, we didn't get any flak; but, after we passed over it, the sky was turned inside out with thundering bursts of those dreaded shells. The full fury of Hitler's defenses, intended for us but headed for those who followed us!

Immediately, the formation wheeled to a heading of 180o + everyone reduced their power settings + leaned their mixtures down, thread-bare for that long, tedious descent home! Above, the sky was once again filled with P-38s + P-51s waiting for the Luftwaffe. Slowly + gently, we "drifted" the burdenless "birds" towards the Alps, and we could see stragglers + those who had engine trouble, literally crawling + brushing over the barren alpine peaks. Some with engines out, some without oxygen + some hit by flak. As we crossed the Alps, P-51s and P-38s on their homeward journey went buzzing down the canyons + shooting + strafing towns below us, having a great time, as they always do, meanwhile raising cane with enemy towns!

Down across Yugo + over the Adriatic, we were once more obscured from the ground. By now, we had been on oxygen for 6 hours + Kiefer + I were almost in pain with fatigue + need for taking a ---- (you know). Our cheeks were drawn + his sinuses were pounding mercilessly; he even lay back + tried to close his eyes for a relief, as I kept the ship right on the lead ship's wing.

Finally, we were almost praying that we'd get to 12,000 feet where we could take off the masks + get some K-rations to strengthen our drained resources of mental energy. When that glorious moment arrived,

in mid-Adriatic, we took turns eating cheese, crackers, dextrose tablets, coffee (still warm) + a new chew of gum, it felt like heaven on earth!

Then, as the mountains of the promontory appeared, we knew that home was in sight. As the formation flew inland, from the ocean, there were only 3 of the 6 ships in our squadron remaining; the rest had left formation for various reasons of their own (all got home, in our group, at one time or another).

As the formation peeled off over the field, only the last semblance of energy was mustered, as Kiefer rolled, or rather "sloshed" the wheels along the steel mat which was undermined by tremendous puddles + pools of water. We had been in the air 9 hours + covered 1600 miles of territory, in addition to rendezvous circling. As we unraveled our complicated maze of wires + straps + harnesses + life vests + parachutes + helmets + masks, we knew we had been to Brux, or someplace nearer to Hell than I'd ever been.

The anti-climax brought a hot drink of coffee + some do-nuts + a pretty smile from a Red Cross girl at interrogation. So, as everyone is waiting for the reconnaissance survey on our trip, I am ready to retire + get some rest.

P.S. If we hit it hard, you will have noticed it in the papers – Brux – Br-r-r-r!! (12/16/44)

*Undoubtedly, George meant to write *eastern Germany* instead of *western Germany,* as most of the oil refineries were located in the eastern part of the Reich, in Silesia (Germany), Czechoslovakia, Austria, and Romania.

**Known justifiably among Eighth AF fliers as *Mercilessburg,* it was the city closest to the huge synthetic oil refinery complex at Leuna, where 1,280 Allied airmen were lost.[35]

(See Appendix I-3)

We were in formation for 9 solid hours and oxygen for 6 ¾ hours

I was up there, after 'em again today. This time, we went to Blechhammer, which also lies near the border of Czech. + not so far from Poland. Blechhammer is not too big of a town but it is another place that

Hitler chose to place his oil refineries, supposedly out of the range of our bombers. This trip was actually longer than yesterday's, for we were in formation for 9 solid hours + oxygen for 6 ¾ hours. That makes a total of 18 hours flying in two days, with 13 hours at high altitude. Perhaps I'm not tired!

*Blechhammer is No. 2 in the big 4 targets within the 15th Air Force category of targets. They are, in order, Brux, Blechhammer, Vienna + Munich. So, I've been to two of the big ones + on successive days.

They got us up at 3:30, once again, + we were off at 7:00. Once again the 97th was the lead squadron in the entire air force, which included wave after wave of planes, today! Before we ever reached the target, we had moved up in the formation when one of the planes dropped out; so, we were in No. 3 position in the entire group, flying on the left wing of the leader, Colonel Jones, who is assistant Group C.O. That made it easy to fly because the lead ship flies on automatic pilot. Anyhow, we hit the target, because we dropped our bombs exactly when the lead ship did + he had a radar "Mickey" with which to spot the target!

At the target, there was an overcast and they shot at us

I got to see Germany, today, as there were patches of ground before reaching the target, to see. At the target, there was an overcast + they shot at us; but, the flak was inaccurate + heavy, although the colonel did a good job of leading our wave around it all. Finally, we cleared the danger area + began the long, long, 700 mile journey back through Germany, Hungary, + Yugoslavia. (We went up a new way, this time, east of the Alps + not far from Budapest!)

On the way back, there was a solid sea of white cloud, all the way home + it rolled just like an immense ocean, in which all the waves were crystal white. Here's a point of interest! The Krauts tried to jam-up our inter-plane V.H.F. frequency, when they had a xylophone running up + down the scale, with intermittent whistling + horns. Naturally, it wasn't successful! However, just after we started the down-hill trip home, the German broadcast station played a beautiful program of accordion + piano music with a few Strauss waltzes, + "Perfidia," no less. That continued during the entire ride down through the Balkans.

It was easy, + almost relaxing, to be flying on the wing of the lead plane, during the long, gentle slope towards home. We broke out so that we could see below, when we hit the Adriatic, as per usual. Then, we were at 7,000 feet + it was time to take off our oxygen masks + dig into the dinner K-rations (crackers, cheese, dextrose tablets, etc.) Why, here's an ad. for the makers of coffee Thermos jugs. When Conway produced the Thermos jug, which had been sitting back in the waist during the flight, the coffee was still hot, after being exposed to 50o below temperature. Well, it was a welcome bit of relaxation to receive 5 letters when I arrived back at the squadron.

I went to mass, in my near stupor condition, this evening, at the Group's chapel. I offered my prayers as usual for your health + happiness, Ma. Now, I am very tired; and, since I'm scheduled to fly tomorrow, I think I shall retire. (12/17/44)

*Blechhammer was in Upper Silesia.

It is noteworthy that despite the attackers being briefed that only a few fighters would be present at the target, and those flown by students, the Forty-ninth Wing that was part of the same mission as the force that hit Blechhammer on December 17 encountered stiff fighter opposition with the number of enemy fighters engaged estimated at fifty.[36]

(See Appendix I-4)

Well, I was scheduled to fly this morning, once again. In fact, we got as far as the airplane, when we couldn't get No. 2 engine to function properly. So, we couldn't take off + we came back

Betty, it looks like another match you are making. You know, I don't know much about Dotty King; but, she certainly seems like a nice girl + Catholic at that. I'm anxious to hear from her. She must be a real girl. No, I can't see how it would hurt to write to her. I might as well keep my "irons in the fire" as they say in the blacksmith shop. (12/18/44)

George's sister Betty was his agent in navigating the precarious skies of the female species. Although her arranged pen-pal

enterprises had mixed results, she would in time be exonerated in this role but not until after the war.

Today, I'm pretty bone-weary after those two long drawn-out affairs of the past two days. My right arm feels like it is dropping off after twisting that 30 ton "bird" all around the sky. My eyes feel like two burned holes in a blanket, after chasing those silver clouds + silver planes through that sunlit stratosphere. Yes, combat flying is tedious + wearying, in case you're interested.

Still in all, Germany makes it pleasant for us when we leave their oil refineries in smoke, by playing sweet music into our ears, as we head home. The music relaxes a fellow's mind, too! Don't think it doesn't. Well, as the "Eyeties" say, "Finis" for the evening. (12/18/44)

I went to the Flagella Theatre and saw Abbott and Costello

I received your letter of Dec. 5, Ma + I also got one from Junior, written on Dec. 4. So, you can see that this mail doesn't come too quickly from England, either. Perhaps things will get straightened out after Christmas. I wish that those packages would come along, not because I can't do without but just to receive them, that's all!

I went into town this afternoon + listened to some records at the Red Cross building! Then, I went to the Flagella Theatre + saw Abbott + Costello in "Lost with a Harem." It was rather ridiculous, but, it made me laugh a few times and that is what counts.

Don't be alarmed at the Germans' current offensive, but, don't expect to see the war end in Europe for another year. Practically, it won't, but, it has reached the stage where it could fold immediately, all depending on when Germany's oil supply gives out. (12/19/44)

The offensive that George was referring to was undoubtedly the conflagration in the Ardennes Forest of Belgium, the Battle of the Bulge. With respect to targets, wrecking rail centers was almost on par with oil in terms of priority. Sometimes the orders to aim for railroads were stretched by going after marshalling yards adjacent to refineries, where some bombs were certain to "drift"

onto key components of oil installations. This drift was not exactly accidental, for fliers and squadron leaders often had agendas that were at variance with those of official command.

It would be nice to think of going into town + having dinner for a "change." But, there's not a solitary place in Foggia which has enough paraphernalia to serve an edible meal.

In the afternoon, we went to see a western thriller at the Flagella Theatre, "Stagecoach" with John Wayne! They don't have too good a projector, but it could be worse. The acoustics are not too good either.

While we were eating supper, a squadron of B-24s landed at the field + ate at our mess. They had run into weather while returning from Pilsen + their gas was just about gone. Ma, those fellows deserve pity, if anyone does. Whenever you hear of 10 bombers, 15 bombers, etc. being lost in the day's activities, you can always assume that 95 out of 100 are "boxcars" (B-24s). They'll blow up on the drop of a hat + they can't fly as long as the 17s. (12/20/44)

Clearly the foregoing letter was written by a true B-17 loyalist. It is of interest to read George's analysis of the two heavy bombers written five decades later.

COMPARISON OF B-17 vs. B-24

Being assigned to the so-called "heavy bombers," my concern was with the B-17. Since we flew alongside the other strategic, heavy bomber, the B-24, a comparison of their capabilities is very interesting. The B-17, "Flying Fortress" designed, developed and built by Boeing Aircraft was the first successful long-range, high altitude bomber. It was employed in both the European and Pacific Theater[s] of Operations. As the war developed in 1941, it was determined that a lot more bombers would be needed than could be provided by Boeing with its B-17. So, the B-24 "Liberator" was selected as the latest and most efficient design, with an advanced wing design called the "Davis" wing amongst other new features. The real key to the B-24, though, was that it could be built and

assembled much faster than the B-17, by General Dynamics Corp. It was also designed to carry more bombs, fly higher, fly faster, and travel a longer range. They were built also by Consolidated Aircraft, which also built the Vultee aircraft. One major subcontractor who built many of the B-24s was Henry Ford II, from his plant at Willow Run, near Detroit.

So, as production moved forward, they [B-24s] were built faster than the B-17s, which were also scheduled into greater production. As is obvious, the design looks like a flying boxcar. Sometimes, B-17 pilots referred to them as "banana boats" because of their obvious contrast with the sleek-looking B-17 Fortresses.

By the time my crew got into combat, the effectiveness of the B-24s had defined themselves as planes that were less maneuverable and carried fewer bombs. It did not fly as efficiently at higher altitudes, as the B-17. In addition, its range was not as great as hoped for. By its shape, it was more vulnerable to anti-aircraft fire and fighter plane attacks. During my tour of duty, the B-24s were flying at 22,000 to 23,000 ft., in looser formation and slower than the B-17s, which were at 25,000 to 28,000 ft., in tight formation, flying faster and less vulnerable to fighter plane interdiction. Thus, I was most grateful to be on B-17s, for in a way, the B-24 acted as a magnet that made it more attractive to enemy action. In fact, the B-17s, in Italy, experienced a far less incidence of casualty, due to all of these factors. I have always, then and now, been thankful for having been assigned to B-17s.

On the other hand, pilots and crews that flew on the B-24 "Liberator," who are still alive today, remain loyal to the B-24 because, after all, they experienced their share of combat and harrowing situations. The B-24 got them home from their missions, to be alive today, just as was the case with the B-17s for me and others. Time equalizes many factors like the comparisons of things which did the same mission, and which seemed to be such a vivid contrast in those days. (G.H.N., 1991)[37]

According to Murray,[38] more than 19,000 B-24s were manufactured during the war, and a number of these impressive aircraft were still in service in 1952.

I went on another new type of "mission"

We were up at 4:30 this damp, muddy morning for briefing. We went through all the pomp + ceremony of that information-giving + all important part of the mission. Yet, we didn't get as far as the airplanes before the red flare from the control tower went up indicating "no mission." Of course, everyone was a trifle disgruntled because the opinion is general that if you have to get up that early + go through the motions, you might as well fly!

At any rate, I went on another new type of "mission," to use a rather far-fetched meaning of the word. When Capt. Ferris, the base adjutant came into the club + asked, "Would anyone like to go + find some holly, for Christmas decorations?" Of course I was one of the 7 who volunteered, just for something to do. So, we loaded onto an 8 wheel truck, with an enlisted man at the wheel. Some of the boys anticipated a little trek into the woods where perhaps a deer or a bear might be lurking, so they had their guns along. What I had thought would be a "trip down the road" turned out to be [a] 70 mile, 2 ½ hour drive over the rocky roads that weave through the mountains of the promontory which forms the "spur" of Italy. (12/22/44)

The mission was successful after a long trek through the Italian highland. Reaching the spot known for its extraordinary holly crop, and meeting up with some RAF men with the same intention, they began the harvest. After a bonfire with the Limeys featuring K-rations and some shooting at enemy trees and stone walls, the entourage headed back. Passing through the countryside, George saw what he described as the only town that was not wrecked by the war. What he described was an idyllic portrait of old Italy.

En route, we passed through San Giovanni, a peaceful, unscathed, peasant town, where one could see the Italian people making through the streets with 3 + 4 baskets piled on their heads, + the donkeys + carts, as you always see the Italian peasant scene depicted. The difference, for me, was that it was the first undamaged town that I had seen! (12/22/22)

This evening, we celebrate the inaugural of a 4-way lighting system in the tent. Foster has been working on a scheme for having a light over each of our beds (pardon me, cots!!) (12/22/44)

Today, the last shopping day before "La fete de Bono Natale" lent itself very appropriately to the occasion of dressing our club room in its gala Christmas trappings. Since the scheduled mission was cancelled in the midst of the solemn ritual of briefing, everyone was available to help take the bareness off our club room. (12/23/44)

Another group, of which I was an insignificant part, set about the task of decorating while, still another group of "skilled artists" went about drawing caricatures of Santa Claus, the "400 mission kid," etc. For decorations, all the wrappings from Christmas packages were cut up into various shapes + patterns + pasted onto the wall. Then, we made big balls of tinsel out of the *"chaff" which is thrown out of the plane, on the bomb run, to confuse the enemy radar operators. It was cold + raw around here; so it reminded me of a Christmas at home, sans snow + ice!

I imagine that you've heard of "Yank" magazine which comes out once a week. In my opinion, this army magazine is one of the most complete magazines that one could read, today, including **Sat. Post, etc. It has fiction, editorials, pictures, jokes, poetry + the most important item "Mail Call." In mail call, officers + enlisted men write their criticisms on topics on everything from criticizing generals down to having their girlfriends sent over here. They criticize the alleged "war bond ads" in magazines at home + they tear down the administration, etc.

I imagine that the current news on the war front has stirred you people, considerably more than me. For, as you know, I have long since decided that we'd be having a long war, thinking of the worst, while hoping to be pleasantly surprised.

(12/23/44)
*Chaff was comparable in appearance and substance to Christmas tree tinsel.[39]
**Referring to *The Saturday Evening Post*, known by some as "America's magazine" that has circulated widely in the US in one form or another from 1778 to the present.[40]

"Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the tent, not a creature was stirring, not even the mouse which habitually feasts upon our candy rations." Bah! Humbug! This isn't Christmas. I just hope that we never get any farther removed from Christmas as we all know it! In spite of it all, at least we have some measure of the spirit! Even in our own little tent which is now so snugly heated + brightly lighted, we have our own Christmas tree. Today, Foster set up a pine tree, the best we could find, right next to our improvised clothes closet. We have it decorated with the tinsel which is thrown from the planes over the target as a contra-radar device. On top, Foster fashioned a metal star + has a candle attached to it. Around the bottom we have spread the packages that we have received, so far. At least, we can look across the room + see the candle glimmering at the top of the tree + imagine the scene as it would be, back home. There we'd all be straining at the leash to *gollup all the hard candy + ribbon candy. Visitors would be running to + fro + everything would be bountiful.

Outside, tonight, the Italian cold and rain continues to beat on the top of our tent

At least, tonight, far away in Italy as I am, there is more atmosphere than we enjoyed at Walnut Ridge, last year. For, we have our own private tent, with things arranged as we like, our own private tree + above all there is a group of fellows who have seen the light, + the need for a sound friendship, without greed+ distrust that characterizes many fellows as they go through cadet training! Outside, tonight, the Italian cold + rain continues to beat on the top of our tent + the sea of mud flows, hip-deep, past the door.

At this moment, I am in a quandary as to what will happen, relative to attending the midnight mass festival in Manfredonia. It seems that the mission for which we have been briefed the past 3 mornings is scheduled

again, tomorrow – Christmas day. I'd hate to think of missing that chance to hear a bishop say a solemn high mass, but, I'd also hate to fly tomorrow, without having had any sleep.

At regular Sunday mass, this morning, the chaplain announced that he had received 700 lbs. of candy from boys in the 978th Bomb Group, alone for distribution to the "Bambini" in the town of Foggia + to the children of the people they despise.

I also got a letter from Earl Nelson's wife. Remember "Pop" Nelson, who went through cadets with me? He is in England, on B-24s having been through his training at Smyrna, Tenn. + Boise, Idaho. They both lived in Minneapolis; but Pop's home town is Rice Lake, Wisconsin.

I guess all is accounted for, on this vigil of the great feast. While I know there is still room for a lot of thanks + rejoicing that we are all still alive + well, yet, it stretches our imagination quite a bit, to see the light, this time. I certainly hope that, this may be the last wartime Christmas.

Oh yes, do you recall the Boudreau family from Cambridge which had so many boys playing hockey + football for Cambridge Latin School + Boston College? There are 14 boys in the family, all athletes. Well, one of the boys, Jimmy, is a bombardier in our squadron. I just discovered it today. (12/24/44)
*Presumably gobble up

The Christmas night letter of December 25, 1944 is remarkable as well in its elegant prose as it is in the drama of a combat mission. The cruel irony was obvious: Brux was one of the most dangerous targets in Europe, and the mission occurred on a day when the world longs for peace on earth, the most cherished day in the Christian calendar. Thus the six-and-a-half-page letter is included in its entirety:

Dear Ma and Betty, CHRISTMAS NIGHT!!!

Today, I hope + pray, was the weirdest of any I shall probably endure ever, in considering the experiences of Christmas day! For, we went, in an all-out effort, against the Brux Synthetic Oil refinery, deep in the eastern Germany province of Silesia. But first, let me recapitulate the scene!

Our hopes of a peaceful Christmas faded into oblivion

Our hopes of a peaceful Christmas faded into oblivion when the mission schedule was posted on Christmas Eve, as we sat reminiscing about home in our tents. Although the threatening weather had kept the big "birds" on the ground for 3 previous days, one could not assume that it would be a similar story, today. Those of us who had hopes of attending the high mass of the archbishop in Manfredonia were sorely disappointed, for it meant early to bed + early to rise. So, we all went to bed early, praying that we wouldn't go on a mission of death + destruction on the Lord's birthday!

Sure enough, at 3:55 a.m., the fellow who was "stuck" with wake-up detail came into the tent + announced "It is now 3:55, briefing is at 5:15!" Ma, if I was ever homesick + sore at heart, it was at 3:55 this morning. Nevertheless, the exigency of the occasion of a mission on Christmas, being in a tent, in the mud of Italy, far from home + loved ones, none of these prevented me from carrying on one of my age old traditions, that of opening my Christmas presents early in the morning while everyone else was asleep.

As we dressed, there was only the light of the fire in the stove which shone on the base of our little Christmas tree, where the 4 of us had placed our gifts. For me, it was like sneaking into the parlor, much to everyone's dismay, + trying to find what Santa had brought me by the light of the street light, outside. Yes, my heart + soul + mind was back home for a few spine-tingling moments as I untied those precious little gifts which I had received + carefully guarded for this momentous occasion. That has always been a big moment for me (most fellows had opened theirs, on arrival).

I opened the little jewelry box size one which Bob + Kay had sent. The box + its contents of many wads of paper + cotton finally yielded a sterling silver chain + identification plate for my wrist. It has "G.H. Neilson" on one side + "0828492" on the other. Immediately, I had Foster put it on my wrist, where it has remained + will. That was the first thrill + I do mean that I was tickled to feel as if I was back home! Then, I opened the one of Barbara's. It was a fine tooled-leather wallet, very rich in quality. I left the 3rd one, the package I had from you, for this evening. So, those

brief moments of rejoicing + good cheer fled, as we stepped into the dark, wet morning, to get chow. Chow was Ralston cereal, powdered eggs, evaporated milk, + coffee, far from tasty.

"Good Morning, Merry Christmas, your target is the synthetic oil refinery at Brux!"

Then, every one sat around + passed melancholic remarks about it all, while awaiting transportation to briefing. Someone snapped on the radio + caught a German early-morning Christmas broadcast + Christmas carols. That made us snicker, at the irony of it. Then came briefing. As we entered the "chamber," we could see the distant board with those 4 lethal letters B-R-U-X, as they had been on the 3 previous mornings! The S-2 officer began the proceedings with, "Good Morning, Merry Christmas, your target is the synthetic oil refinery at Brux!" That will be a historic phrase in my life. Imagine, wishing us "Merry Christmas" + in the same breath telling us that we were to go over the heaviest concentration of flak guns that exist in Europe! 400 guns around their precious oil installations!

Then, as we got our equipment at the equipment shack + waded through the mud to the airplanes, it looked + felt like a horrible thing to try + get through the low rain clouds. Yet, the weather man promised us that once over the Adriatic, there'd be no more clouds. Sure enough, we were off as the first signs of light crept through the cold, grey clouds, sloshing down the runway which was so wet + muddy that spray went 50 feet in the air as each plane roared down the mat + pried itself into the sacred day that it would be our duty to obliterate at least for some people!

All the planes stayed close to the ground 'til we got over the water, then the group + wing held its rendezvous over the island of "Split," on the Yugo coast! From that time on, we never saw another cloud. It was a beautiful, crisp morning in all of Europe. And, all of Europe, from Yugo on up, was covered with a blanket of fresh snow. We passed over the Alps into Austria + the weather was so clear that we could see people on the ground, in the highlands of the Alps. Even then, the navigator could still tune us in on the A.E.F. broadcast station in Foggia where the faint strains of "Silent Night," "Noel!" "Adeste Fideles" seemed to be a sacrilegious "joke" as we headed for German soil.... "Peace on Earth."

Then, came the fighter rendezvous where hundreds of P-38s + P-51s gathered to provide the escort for the penetration. At Linz, in Austria, they saw us coming by + fired a lot at us; but, of course, we were steered around it all. So, I saw Germany, for there was not a cloud to be seen, as the plane groaned + reached 28,000 ft., where the temperature was, as usual, 50° below Centigrade!

At 11:45, we went through a solid wall of steel

I never saw so many fighters in all my life. They were sure looking for the Krauts, today. We even passed over German air fields; but, the Messerschmitts were neatly lined up, on the ground. Over each field, a flight of P-51s lurked + waited for the *Hermies to try + take off. Up at 35,000 feet, the P-38s waited for any **jet-propelled planes that might come. Then, at 11:45, we went through a solid wall of steel, as the Germans could see us coming, plainly, to their target. Of course, they had the target veiled in smoke; but, it was the day, for the bombardiers to make a hit, if ever. As we started the bomb-run, God took over; for, it could only be the Lord's treatment of justice + righteousness that led us through the maze of bursting shells, 75, 85, + 105 millimeter shells that burst like bubbles of cauliflower or black extracted teeth. I couldn't see that anyone got a direct hit, although there could be no reason why not. Then, as our turn came I recited my "Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee, now" + held my breath. For even the Protestant boys say there's nothing to do but pray, when you start down that bomb-run, because, the flak is bound to come all around you + only the Almighty seems to keep it from hitting.

Soon, the blood-sweating was over + the rally was on, for the squadrons + groups to reform, then, everyone cut their power down + began the long descent home, which went uneventfully. We hit the target; for, at the rally point, we looked + saw the smoke billowing forth. As we passed over the town of "Wels," in Austria, we could see the ammunition dump which the B-24s were supposed to have hit + they did, for explosions were still taking place as we went past it.

The Colonel had to land with the autopilot, for his rudder was shot away

Then, we passed back over the Alps + Yugo, across the Adriatic, which is like a "welcome" doormat, thence beneath the clouds which blanketed southern Italy + home. The Colonel who led the group had to land with the autopilot, for his rudder was shot away. He also had no brakes + his waist gunners billowed out a parachute, to stop him as his plane plunked onto the sea of mud which covered the steel mat!

So, we completed a very successful mission! One of the prime reasons we went today, was so that the boys in the front lines would know that the Air Corps was doing its part, as long as they the foot soldiers had to be in their trenches. They always accuse the Air Corps of having it "easy" on such occasions as today!

So, we came back to Christmas, once again, + I ate the turkey dinner, but, I didn't enjoy it, excited + tired as I was. Then, I attended mass, at the Group, which was held tonight only because there was a mission, today. They had the chapel well decorated + they had a choir + an organ, which came up from Bari. Besides, the chaplain said a high mass for us. Then, we sang some carols, to round out the service. Finally, I got back to the tent + opened the package which seemed to include everything + nicely packed, too!! I got the nuts in the baking powder can, the fruit cake, + the raisins. Then, I unwrapped the change purse, thank you. I also found the twig from a Christmas tree + Betty's card. By the way, those bells will be put on my dog tag chain as good luck pieces. Yes, I noticed every little bit of homey + affectionateness + thoughtfulness, that went into that package. I opened it, like a little kid, + Foster watched, like another over my shoulder! Ma + Betty, thanks from the bottom of my heart, for making those few moments of Christmas such a joyful time. I can certainly say that I had a happy Christmas, in many ways. Certainly, a fellow can feel happy when he returns from Brux, Christmas or not! So, as Christmas for 1944 comes to a close, I can retire + rejoice, feeling I did a good job for my country, today + besides had a few moments of a Merry Christmas! I hope you had more than those few moments, but, I certainly did enjoy mine!

My Christmas prayers + communion were for you Mother. May God keep you well + make you happy, with all my love, from George. (12/25/44)
*Germans
**Messerschmitt 262s, Germany's revolutionary jet fighters

Confirming the success of the Christmas mission to Brux, Tillman wrote:

> More than 250 heavies struck the synthetic refinery at Brux, Czechoslovakia, and the marshaling yard at Weis, Austria, while 145 others strewed ordnance across rail targets in Austria and Germany. The defenders were equally willing to continue hostilities that Wednesday, as flak over Brux came up "heavy, intense, and accurate." Five B-17s went down, including the one hundredth loss for the Second Group.[41]

(Note: The rendering of the Austrian city above as "Weis" is believed to refer to "Wels" and is spelled incorrectly in this source.)

(See Appendix I-5)

Flames shot 3,000 feet up and smoke came up to 10,000 ft.

The big event of the day was the newscast by the Foggia radio station which said that bomb photos had proven that the oil installations at Brux were badly damaged as a result of the operations on Christmas. So, it appears that our efforts were not in vain. If we can knock it all out, Germany will be without 50% of its synthetic oil.

Today, the Group went to Odertal, which is another oil installation, just 10 miles north of Blechhammer, in the eastern Germany province of Silesia! They had an unusually good day, they said, with a visual bomb-run. They hit the place so hard that flames shot 3,000 feet up + smoke came up to 10,000 ft. They claim that 90% of the bombs hit the target.

If only the weather would stay clear, continued such accuracy would be possible! For, "Micki" is not too accurate for bombing. (12/26/44)

MISSION #6 – VOESENDORF OIL REFINERY, VIENNA, AUSTRIA

Obviously, during December 1944, oil refineries were the prime targets for Strategic Air Forces. On Dec. 27, we were again involved in a "maximum effort," including groups of the 15th B-17s and B-24s from Italy, to hit the Voesendorf Oil Refinery, a natural oil refinery, this time, as opposed to the synthetic refineries in [present day] Poland. Vienna is 475 miles from Foggia. The distance was not a significant problem in this mission, with respect to fuel consumption. Another factor that was a concern on these high altitude bombing missions was oxygen. If you failed to monitor the consumption of oxygen, as well as the available supply, it was possible to find yourself in short supply. It was not practical to expect to be alert, above 16,000 ft. without oxygen to breathe. So, if we ran out, it would be necessary to leave the formation, drop down in altitude and fly as a single plane. This would make us extremely vulnerable, just not worth trying to endure.

We made the usual join-up into formation in the Foggia area, then proceeded up over the Adriatic and the Italian-Austrian Alps. Vienna, of course, sits on the banks of the Danube River, 75 miles north of the Alps Mountains, in southern Austria. The refinery was located south and east of the city. To accomplish the various evasive action maneuvers to approach the target with a minimum of interception from the Germans, we ended up on a 4-minute bomb run, directly across the center section of the city of Vienna. The 97th Bomb Group was in the middle of the parade of bombers; so, the "ack-ack" was fairly well aimed by the time we went over at 25,000 ft. Once again, the various planes in the 4 squadrons in our group all made it safely, but again, with lots of fragment holes in the undersides of the wing and fuselage.

Vienna lies north of Yugoslavia. So, our route back to Italy took us south, across Yugoslavia, which was relatively safe from

opposition, since much of mostly rural, mountainous Yugoslavia was controlled by the "Partisans," who favored the Allies.

Thereafter, it became a routine crossing of the Adriatic, then to peel out of formation for a landing at Foggia. Landings at the 97th Bomb Group's airstrip were never exactly smooth; for, the strip was actually a metal mat, linked together by section and laid across a farm field. So, it was usually a bumpy trip down the runway, either for takeoff or landing, even if the landing was done perfectly. (G.H.N., 1991)[42]

Perforated Steel Planking

Perforated steel planking, PSP, was used in constructing temporary airfields in all theaters of WWII. Originally known as Marston mat after the North Carolina town where it was first tested in 1941, PSP matting is made up of steel strips that hook together without tools and hardware. A typical mat was 10 feet x 15 inches. To make a runway 5,000 feet long x 150 feet wide, 60,000 sheets of PSP were required. The PSP runway was used through Korea and the Vietnam conflicts. Salvage PSP ended up in the infrastructure of some of the tent-huts made by the fliers of the Fifteenth.[43]

There's too many guns in the Vienna woods to suit me, just now

Well, we were "up in the blue," again today. For once, the entire crew flew together. Of course, I've been flying with Kiefer lately; but, then Foster hasn't been flying with us. Well, today we all went together. We had the same cold bird that we were forced to let down early in, en route from Regensburg, on my 2nd mission. The only bird in the squadron that has no heat at all in it, "891." However, it is a good plane for gas consumption; so, nobody minds the lack of heat. Besides, the crew chief is one of those old timers who has probably been a mechanic all his life + really seems to know his business about the plane. He takes care of his plane like it was a baby. That bird has 79 missions on it + has not had a turn-back due to engine failure, yet!

Anyhow, we went to Vienna today. Each group in the 5th Wing took a different one of the oil refineries in the Vienna area. The 97th hit Voesendorf Oil Refinery. After the long hauls to Brux + Blechhammer, the trip to Vienna seemed like a short haul. But, tell Mary to take the record of Junior's, "Tales From the Vienna Woods" + break [it] into 40 pieces. You see, there's too many guns in the Vienna woods to suit me, just now. However, we all got through successfully, in our group. It seems that on Christmas + the next day, the 15th Air Force had some of the best days in its history. For, they claim that the important installations at Brux, Blechhammer, Odertal + Morasuka-Ostravo, in *Sudetenland are all destroyed partially, or seriously impaired. So, they went to work on the Vienna area, today. I believe they went to 8 different oil refineries, today, in the Vienna area.

Today, while it was 50o below zero, I was not at all cold + I got some good use for my sun glasses. Boy! It was bright + clear + a low undercast of clouds made the sun reflect even brighter. Sun glasses are imperative, lest your eyes be almost worn out from tension, strain + glare. I didn't get to see Vienna because of the undercast of clouds that shrouded the target. But, I have no particular desires to see the place, either. (12/27/44)
*Czech territory annexed by Germany in 1938

(See Appendix I-6)

To put this in prospective of the total effort of the Fifteenth AF, fifteen other targets were hit by some seven hundred Foggia-based aircraft on the same day as the Voesendorf operation.[44]

We were so delayed that we were one hour late in taking off

At the beginning of this document I should like to confer the honorary degree of Doctor of Courtesy on one Kendall Foster, whose paper I have the privilege of scribbling on in the absence of the club's tissue paper! The fact remains that I stole it from his portfolio, while he was eating supper.

I received your letter of Dec. 11, to the effect that Betty bought you a decent present, for Christmas. It made my heart tingle when I read that you spent enough to get something decent! It made me feel "grand." Thank

you, Betty, for seeing to it. And, Ma, all I can say is it is about time!!! But, I don't think that $35 is too much for a boy to spend on his mother for Christmas, do you? I only wish you'd use my money more often, when you go to the theatre, to eat, etc.

Well, this morning we were to go to Regensburg; but, we never got to rendezvous! To begin with, the crew chief was unable to get the plane started, in order to pre-flight it! Then, it took 4 portable energizers to put out enough electrical power to start one engine. The armament workers had run the plane's batteries down while working on the plane at night. Finally, they changed one of the plane's batteries + got it started. Then, a couple of fuel lines broke on the engines. We were so delayed that we were one hour late in taking off. It was the same bird that took us to Vienna, by the way!!!

No sooner did we get off the ground than No. 4 engine was smoking

Finally, we got out to the runway + got off, in an attempt to catch the formation at rendezvous. No sooner did we get off the ground than No. 4 engine was smoking. So, I watched the gauges. Sure enough, the oil pressure was dropping off + the oil temperature was going up. We waited until it went well beyond the safe limits. Then, we pushed the feathering button which stopped the engine + twisted the propeller so it would not rotate!

So, there we were with 2800 gallons of gas, 6000 lbs. of bombs + only 1800 ft. altitude. We called the tower for instructions + they advised us to drop the bombs + come in and land. So, we dumped them into the Gulf of Manfredonia + came back + landed. The plane could fly safely on 3 engines, but, we couldn't climb or stay in formation. No excitement, Just a new experience; and, we were much better off than if it had happened up the line!

The plane Dunn was in had lots of troubles + they had to turn back, over Yugoslavia! Dunn says that they got out + carried that bird back. Their main trouble was an oxygen leak!

Well, tonight is the occasion of another festive celebration in the squadron, the 2nd since I've been here. It is to commemorate the 400th

mission, Christmas, + New Years, all in one fell swoop! Tonight, we get to wear our blouses!! How 'bout that? It will be the second time for me, since April. All the colonels from the group will be here and all the "big wheels" will be here. The main thing will be all the "combat whiskey" that has accumulated when the boys signed for + didn't drink it, after each mission, just for the purpose. For me, it will still be Coca-Cola, thank you! I imagine that there'll have a few bedraggled nurses from the Foggia hospital to take the "curse" off the scenery. Of course, they're Limey (English) nurses! (Still more funny) they expect 5 nurses for 100 officers. (12/28/44)

MISSION #7 – INNSBRUCK, AUSTRIA

The briefing officer drew cheers, on *Dec. 2[9], when a planned mission for Brux was scrubbed because of bad winter weather over the target area; bad weather always meant heavy clouds, making it impossible to see the target, visually. The alternate target was then briefed to be Innsbruck where they had massive railroad marshalling yards. These yards were there to assemble and make up trains for shipment through the Brenner Pass to Northern Italy. The Brenner Pass is a natural pass that traverses both the Austrian and Italian Alps en route from Innsbruck, Austria to Verona, Italy. Innsbruck is also a famous University City and a center for mountain ski resorts and recreation areas. The city is surrounded, from the south by high mountains, 8,000 to 10,000 ft. It is about 400 miles from Foggia. We circled up to the north and came down, south, across the city at 24,000 ft., to reach the rail marshalling yards. Apparently, we surprised them, as there was not a lot of flak from gunners. But, it was scary since some of the guns were mounted on the mountain sides, and the shells came up at rather an oblique angle, instead of straight up. (G.H.N., 1991)[45]

*The 1991 manuscript stated "Dec. 28," but compelling evidence, including George's letter and pilot log, supports the date of Dec. 29 for this mission.

We ended up, Kiefer and I at 20 feet above the waves of the ocean

Well, I'm so tired, tonight, that I can hardly hold my pen! Last night, on the occasion of the big party, they told those of us who were scheduled to fly not to worry too much about going to bed early, because today's mission was rumored to be an "easy" one, if you can call going anywhere up there "easy!"

We did get up late + start[ed] at 8:30; but, we had beaucoup excitement! The entire air force hit Innsbruck, Austria. Innsbruck is a rail center at the northern end of the Brenner Pass, in the Alps. And, it is located in a valley between two peaks, at the head of the pass. Because the city is so narrow + situated in a valley, it was necessary for the bombing formations to be split into squadrons, at the target. The 97th Group was last over the target, and, our squadron was the last of 28 squadrons to hit the target! (12/29/44)

A few words are deleted here because of damage to a corner of the letter quoted next.

Well, they messed up the timing, [] altitude, etc. As a consequence, the [] had to circle for 35 minutes in [] target area, awaiting our turn. It seemed [] alpine farmer + his family had anti-aircraft guns!! For, no matter where [], there were big shells exploding [] apparently over the desolate []. We made a "dry run" on [] because the radar [] didn't pick up the target, because of the mountains. Perhaps you don't think it's disheartening to tensely wait for those bombs to fall through the open doors + then to see the doors close with the bombs still in the plane!!!!

Finally, when everyone had gotten frantic, they wheeled through the valley + let them go. Our squadron got a bit to one side + I'm afraid some bombs cascaded down a mountain. The object of the mission was to hit that key city of the Brenner Pass route. Ma, a 30 minute period over the target just about makes you fit to be tied! Anyhow, there was only a 1st Lt. leading the group, today, no colonels! You should have heard the inter-plane communications to the lead ship!

Then, we spotted 7 Me109s, north of Venice; and, of course we had to be wary of them. En route back, the weather became gradually closed

in over the Adriatic. So, as we got within 100 miles of Foggia, the clouds were solid from the water right up to 25,000 feet. So, the group leader dove down, instead of a usual let-down, in a vain attempt to get under the weather. One would think that he was only worrying about himself instead of 4 squadrons – 28 planes. For, we ended up, Kiefer + I at 20 feet above the waves of the ocean, riding in prop-wash of the planes ahead of us. We were only 20 feet above it! Can you imagine 28 planes sweeping across the water + inland from the ocean at only that height? Dangerous is not the word that describes it. One slip + we'd all have "had it." As luck would have it, the ceiling was higher over the base + we raised up + made a normal landing pattern. As if the target was not bad enough, we had to encounter all that weather! We were very, very tired + nervous, this afternoon, after all that!

Well, our ability to fly formation has helped Kiefer get the No. 4 position in the squadron formation, whenever he flies. That is an easy place to fly + it is only once removed from squadron lead. No. 4 leads the second element in the squadron formation.

X (1)
X (3) X (2)
X (4)
X (6) X (5)
X (9)
X (7) X (8)

(12/29/44)

(See Appendix I-7)

We have a lot of laughs and nobody except Kiefer takes the game too seriously

I got myself pretty worked up about coming in across the water so low, yesterday. The lead squadron forgot about the planes in the low squadron, as he attempted to duck the squadron under the clouds. He almost ducked

us into the Adriatic Ocean. But, I arose this morning relaxed + in good spirits, once again.

At the supper table, this evening, a fellow asked me what part of Boston I came from. His name was Irving Emerson, the fellow I flew with, first over here. Come to find out, he comes from Connecticut + his sister is a great friend of Barbara Groff. Both Emerson's sister + Barbara Groff went through nurse training at the Mass. General Hospital. He's had quite a few experiences over here. He ditched in the Adriatic, once! (12/30/44)

On the authority of Tillman[46]:

> The war continued with missions on the four days following Christmas, at a cost of forty-four aircraft, including sixteen bombers and two fighters, over Blechhammer and Auschwitz on the twenty-sixth. The latter proved the last major strike against the notorious oil refinery.

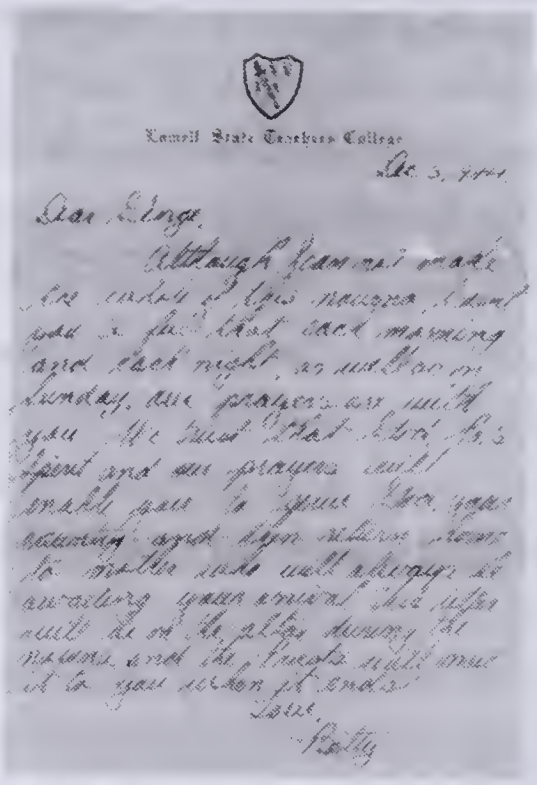
We were up at 3:30 this morning to brief + get ready for a mission that would have taken us over northern Italy, to bomb rail targets. The "sad truth of it," (as Dunn would say), was that we got into the airplane before the red flare halted the proceedings – the weather looked nearly impossible! When we got up, it was very, very cold this morning. It was probably much below freezing, for all the puddles + ponds were covered with ice. That's the coldest it has been, since I've been overseas. (12/31/44)

Tillman wrote of the first morning of January:

> New Year's Eve arrived on a near-blizzard wind with driving snow that discouraged much celebrating. Mostly the fliers and support personnel huddled in their billets or crowded into officers' and enlisted men's clubs, enjoying whatever seasonal festivities the USO, Red Cross, or Salvation Army could offer.[47]

I decided to try something different in the way of going to church, this morning; so, I attended mass in the Church of Jesu Maria in Foggia. The priest must have known Fr. Sullivan, for he failed to read the gospel. The church wasn't much, needless to say. American bombs took care of most of Foggia's good buildings! After church, I trundled myself to the outskirts of town to visit a navigator who had been hit by flak, last week, at the Foggia U.S. Army hospital. (12/31/44)

Thus, as the year 1944 passed into history, the Germans had been pushed back almost behind their 1939 borders in the west. The Red Army was moving rapidly eastward toward Germany. The Reich's fuel supplies were depleted. The German Armies were desperately lacking provisions and food, while the fanatical government in Berlin groped for ways to remain in the fight. The war was far from over.



Lowell State Teachers College

Dec. 3, 1944

Dear Edge,

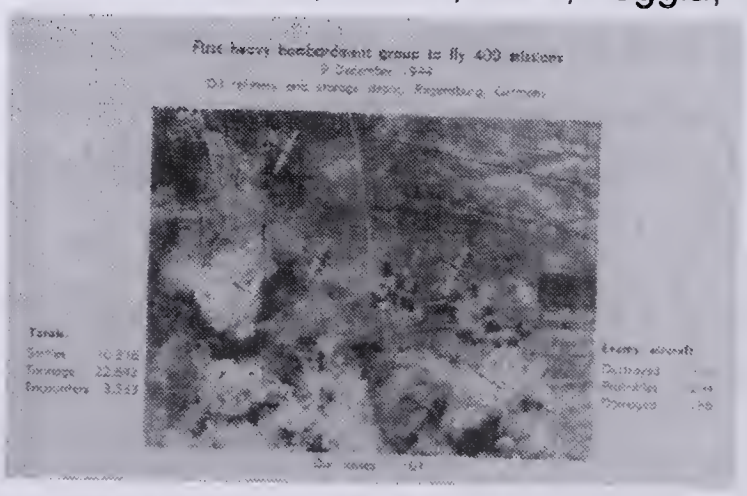
Although I can not make the orders of this message, I want you to feel that each morning and each night, as well as on Sunday, our prayers are with you. We trust that God's Spirit and our prayers will enable you to serve Him, your country, and your fellow men. We will always be awaiting your arrival. The letter will be on the alter during the morning and the treats will come to you when it ends.

Love,

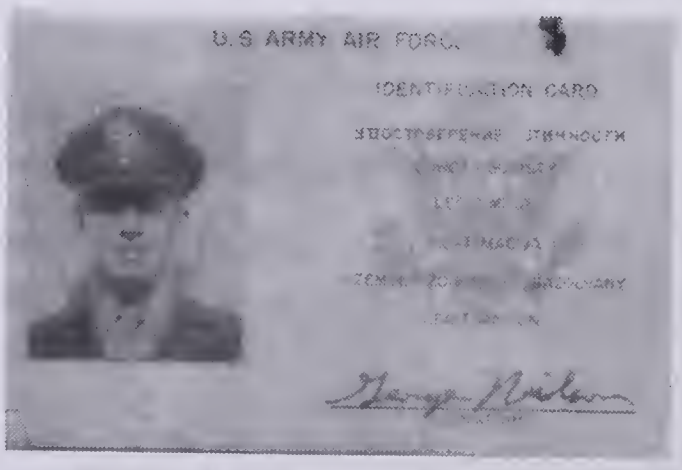
Betty

Note written by Betty Neilson to brother George, December, 1944

Makeshift tent heater, Dec. 4, 1944, Foggia, Italy



Bombing of oil refinery and storage depot, Regensburg, Germany, 400th mission by 97th Bombardment Group (From 400 Missions, commemorative booklet of 97th BG, January 1944)



ID Card in several languages

12/9/44

"Red" Letter Day — Saturday night — Dec. 9

Dear Mac & Dot Betty,

Well today was a momentous day — both for me & the 97th Bomb Group!! For me, it was the first penetration over German soil while for the 97th it was their 400th combat mission. They, the original heavy outfit to bomb by daylight, are the first heavy bombardment unit to have participated in 400 missions. Doubtless, by now you will have read all about it in the papers but I judge that they planned to make a big play of it for they wanted everyone who participated to agree for a piece in their local home-town newspaper!

It all began with briefing at 5:30 this morning, where the intelligence officer began the proceedings. For the occasion, the 97th was to lead the entire air-force of 750 bombers in a maximum effort against Brux, which is at present the highest priority target on the European continent. For Germany's greatest synthetic oil refineries are located there. In order to insure an important operation, all the alternate targets were A-1 priority attacks too!

Col. Ohman, Group C.O. & a West Pointer, was to lead it all. — I was with Lt. Jurgens, a veteran of 45 missions! But we were the squadron's spare — to stand by in case some ships

Letter describing celebrated 97th Bomb Group's 400th combat mission and George's first penetration of German air space, Dec. 9, 1944

Chapter 17

Combat Missions and Rest Camp, January 1945

Amendola Air Base
Foggia, Italy, and Isle of Capri, Italy

The Beginning of the End: Allied Offensives Surge

As the world awoke to the year 1945, there was no sign that either of the remaining Axis powers (Germany and Japan) would soon surrender. On the other side of the world from Europe, the island-hopping campaign went inexorably forward, depriving the Japanese of valuable raw materials for its hungry war machine when, like the Battle of the Bulge in Europe, Japan had its cataclysmic setback.

In the fall of 1944, US naval reconnaissance discovered several undefended airfields in the central Philippines. Returning pilots claimed to have destroyed 478 enemy aircraft on the ground and sunk fifty-nine ships. Gen. MacArthur's incursion plan, previously rejected by Washington, went forward. In the ensuing Battle of Leyte Gulf on October 22–23, US Admiral William "Bull" Halsey's Third Fleet sailed deep into the archipelago before the Japanese opened fire. By the end of the battle, the Japanese had lost thirty-five more ships and over ten thousand airmen and sailors. The Philippines was lost as the last great buffer for the Japanese homeland. The next Allied aim was the tiny, lifeless volcanic island of Iwo Jima, 650 miles south of Tokyo, the southernmost point of the Japanese home islands.[1]

In Europe, the Soviets launched their winter offensive early in January and were rapidly advancing toward the eastern borders of Germany. The Germans began moving Allied prisoners of war further west as the Soviets crossed the Oder and Neisse Rivers on the German-Polish frontier. Some five thousand air force

POWs were held in what were called Stalag Luft camps within the Reich. The prisoners were moved, mostly on forced marches in freezing cold and snow. The objective was to prevent them from being freed by the Russians, depriving Germany of their use as pawns in making a separate peace with the western Allies.[2]

In January, the US Army suffered 39,000 battle casualties, including the effort to push the Germans back to the Siegfried line following the Ardennes campaign. The Allied advance was made possible by the swarms of US Thunderbolts and British Typhoons flying low, following the tracks of German tanks in the snow. Fatal delays due to gasoline shortages rendered the retreat a rout in which German casualties mounted rapidly and thousands of vehicles were abandoned in the field.[3]

The Allied commanders actually overestimated German strength at the start of the new year. Because of persistent winter cloud cover over Central Europe, photoreconnaissance concealed the extent of damage to the German transportation network. Reports were pessimistic. Gen. Carl "Tooey" Spaatz, Allied air commander over Europe, wrote to Gen. Hap Arnold in Washington, "Our estimation of the situation does not lead up to the conclusion that German strength will crack in the near future."[4] The talk was of planning a completely new air strategy with the outlook for a long, drawn-out war. It called for fighter-bomber raids on a large spectrum of targets within German cities, amounting to terror bombing. By February, however, a thorough analysis of reconnaissance photos and radio intercepts told a far different story. In fact, the German economy and its war machine were on the verge of total collapse.

The Reichsbahn (German national railway system) was damaged beyond hope of recovery. The coal- and iron-rich Ruhr District was isolated from the rest of the country. Deprived of the raw materials essential to production, gasworks, power plants, and munitions, mills either closed down or were forced to dramatically curtail output. And with Germany's rail system under daily assault, component parts, including ball bearings, could not reach the final points of production. By late January, it was impossible for

either the Luftwaffe or the motorized units of the Wehrmacht to organize effective resistance.[5] The irrational dictator repeatedly refused the pleading of his field commanders to pull back to avoid the destruction or capture of their faltering armies. His insistence on fighting to the last man would result, in Miller's[6] words, in "a veritable rain of ruin" in the last months of the war.

One of the Nazi leadership's desperation schemes was to raise a Volksturm, or people's army, to defend the homeland. It was composed of men as old as age fifty, youth as young as fifteen, and veterans. Yet arming, supplying, and mobilizing such an army was beyond the resources available to the Reich. In the end, its vision, like the V-1 and V-2, the Great Blow, the Ardennes offensive, and turbojet fighters, failed to materialize as an efficacious strategy but dwelt instead in the graveyard of Nazi fantasies.

In the final year of the European war, the US Air Force's dogmatic position against civilian bombing began to bend as Eighth and Fifteenth air fleets attacked urban targets at Vienna and Berlin as well as Sofia, Belgrade, and Bucharest in the Balkans. The Eighth Air Force meanwhile went after the great transportation centers of Cologne and Frankfurt among others. Aiming for strategic targets, it was inevitable that thousands of civilians in adjacent neighborhoods would fall victim to the bombs. Berlin, already the target of hundreds of missions, would be mercilessly pummeled, killing thousands of refugees fleeing from the eastern front who were thronging railroad stations in great masses. Moral considerations took a backseat to strategy. It was total war as the conflict grew desperate for a conclusion.[7]

The Fifteenth was only able to fly missions on eight days in January, and few of these to Germany. However there was an effort to hit rail yards in Yugoslavia and eastern Austria to prevent supplies from reaching counteroffensives against Soviet attacks. Low ceilings and overcast hampered operations. Oil remained a priority target, although many of the installations had been put out of operation by Fifteenth bombing. In addition to producing fuel, the synthetic oil refineries produced methanol and nitrogen needed for

explosives. Hitting these plants was a double jeopardy for Germany. Moorsbierbaum, Voesendorf, Fiume (Italy) and the stand-by giants of Brux, Blechhammer, and Ruhland still fed the German war machine. Luftwaffe planes were scarce in January except when forty FW 190s tried to attack Foggia-based heavies on a January 20 mission to Regensburg. All in all, that city was one of the most formidably defended places in the German Reich, fighters and flak considered. It was the ash heap of far too many Allied planes.[8]

OFF DAY ACTIVITIES

When we were not assigned or when the mission was cancelled, there was little to do in our tent city, located as it was in the farm flatlands, under the "Spur" of Italy. Except for meals, all there was there was the arrival of mail and packages. So, the routine involved thumbing a ride on a military truck, to head for the U.S.O. club in Foggia. Foggia had been devastated both by the Air Forces and the Army, as they advanced. The local Italian people were not very excited about seeing us come to town. In the first place, the town was a relatively poor farm center. The only pleasant place to go was the U.S.O. building where it was reasonably comfortable and have coffee and cookies. Typically, we would try to kill an entire day there before hitching a ride back on Manfredonia Rd. to the 97th area.

The U.S.O. Club employed local Italian people to wait on the officers. I recall one girl who was a school teacher, by profession. She spared no thought or words in explaining how she respected the German soldiers and airmen, when they were in town, because they always wore their best uniforms to town and were more courteous soldiers. [Our] airmen and officers were not required to be in their dress uniforms to go to town. (G.H.N., 1991)[9]

There was little else to do, but get on the highway and "bum" our way into Foggia

Well, snow flurries + heavy clouds caused the scheduled mission to be scrubbed so that I could rest in bed until 7:30, this New Year's Day

morning. Today was a real cold, blustery day such as you might expect around home. There was a crust on top of the mud, so that what little snow did fall managed to keep the ground white.

I have saved 38 packs of cigarettes, to be used when a situation warrants, that is, to trade with the "Eyeties." They are worth 70 cents now, + still going up!

One of the navigators, an Italian boy named Scotcio, was very fortunate in being at rest camp in Rome, at Christmas time. He attended the Pope's midnight mass at St. Peter's. Evidently, there are some people in Foggia who are not bedraggled + depraved because of the war. He said that the people tell him that the people like the Americans + how they treat the children, etc. more than they did the Germans. However, they respect the German soldier, in respect to the American "sloppy" soldiers. The people go crazy over the basketfuls of goodies that they [the Americans] gave the children at various Christmas parties, in Foggia.

Today, I am 23 years young

This morning, I went over to the Italian people who I bring my O.D. clothes to + Antoinette, the girl who ordinarily does my clothes, was suffering terribly from chapped lips. So, I went back + got some Vaseline that Foster had. She was happy to receive it. She kept saying, "How much?" "How much?" Her lips were so sore that she couldn't even smile. So, it seemed good to make some person feel happy, today.

Well, "finis" for now. Today, I am 23 years young. I guess the best I can do is wish you folks a happy and brighter new year. (1/1/45)

Naturally, I was quite pleased + even a bit excited + proud to read about Bob getting his captaincy!! I guess that he's had it harder than any of us; and, he most certainly deserves his rank. He's the real soldier of the family! Make sure you tell Frank Trott; because Frank always thought Bob was a "good looking officer." Things seem to be moving Bob's way now, after quite a bit of rough sledding. I guess that you realize that being a captain in the Infantry is a high rank + really is not easy to accomplish. His infantry company compares very closely to an Air Force squadron, where it calls for a Major or a Lt. Colonel in command! I'll bet that *Otto

is pleased, isn't he? He'll never stop raving, especially since he was an infantry man himself.

As a result of recent 15th Air Force activity, the oil refinery targets have been taken off the priority list temporarily, for the first time since last March! Evidently Brux + Blechhammer have taken a beating, lately.

Infantry men prefer their risks to the dangers of flying!

A pamphlet was recently published in the interest of inter-unit understanding. It was a result of observation made by Air Corps officers who subjected themselves to the life of an infantry outfit + of infantry men who went on flying missions! Here's the results:

1. Infantry men prefer their risks to the dangers of flying!
2. The dangers infantry men are afraid of:
    a. Use + importance of oxygen
    b. Fear of frostbite and intense cold!
    c. Pressure of "you can't make a mistake" discipline of aerial combat!
    d. Flak guns seem to be too big for the infantry men.
3. Consensus of infantry man seems to be, "No, thank you!"

There is considerable of this inter-organization observation being done to help eliminate the talk of how easy one branch has it, in comparison with the other! It has done a lot for those who are over jealous. (1/2/45)
*George's uncle, Otto J.C. Neilson, was a veteran of the Spanish-American War.

We didn't fly again, today; so, I played a lot of Ping-Pong. Playing doubles, I happened to play against Col. Shafer, again. Naturally, I beat him again; but, he's a good sport + doesn't pout about it! (1/3/45)

Though it would have been interesting to learn what the airmen thought of the infantry in the exchange study, it seems George wanted to make the point that aerial combat is far from the lap of luxury that might be imagined by ground troops. Without a

doubt, the infantry was miserable and lethal. Each service had its terrors in wartime. None of it was safe; none of it was easy. Each serviceman confronted his own unique set of fears, conquered them, and sometimes died with them.

MISSION #8, VERONA, ITALY

On Jan. 4, 1945, we were sent up to Verona, which is the funnel point for both rail and road traffic at the southern end of the Brenner Pass. In a sense, this trip was a duplicate of the trip to Innsbruck as our target was also the rail marshalling yards. We were very successful there, because the resistance was light; and, we [were] able to destroy a large number of freight cars and supply materials. In terms of distance (320 miles) and opposition (light) the mission conformed to the definition "milk run," meaning that the mission turned out to be as easy as that of the milkman who delivered milk to the neighborhood houses, each day. Naturally, nobody ever opposed the milk man on his early-morning routes. But, in terms of effectiveness, the mission was termed successful as we interfered with considerable supplies headed for German troops in northern Italy.

During the period from July, 1944 to April, 1945, the ground war was primarily in the Apennines Mountains, between Florence and Bologna, in northern Italy. The Apennines are the highest mountains in Italy, 2,500-3,000 ft. The ground war was handled by the U.S. 5th Army which had been in the war all the way since the invasion of North Africa, at Casablanca, through the invasion of Italy, at Anzio, a total of 5 years. By the winter and spring of 1944-1945, the Germans and their Italian cohorts were constantly being backed up. However, in the Apennines, the fighting was difficult because of the mountainous terrain. (G.H.N., 1991)[10]

(There was no letter for the Verona mission, see Appendix I-8)

Well, now, what do you know! I received the nice package with the Halloween trappings, along with the Christmas packages, this afternoon.

It was one of the ones you probably sent prior to Oct. 15, to my temporary A.P.O. number. When I opened the package, naturally, Kiefer, Dunn, + Foster were all on hand; so, when they spied the Halloween horn + the paper whistle, they all started to laugh! So, there followed a brief interlude of horn-tooting! Then, I carefully exhumed the rest of the parcels from beneath the tissue paper. I found the box of "Airline" writing paper, the box of Anna Mack's chocolates, the Hershey bars, the bitter-sweet chocolate + the Christmas card!

Since there is a front of weather surrounding the territory, there was no flying today, nothing but rain + mud, not even blood or tears.

You should see how our crew has improved since we were at Gulfport! Whenever there is anything said over the interphone, they all answer before you finish telling them. Conway is a very faithful, conscientious fellow who never fails on his job. We are fortunate in having some modest boys who do not think that they have to "sweat out" the missions like the officers. Youvell, the tail gunner, is the calmest man on the airplane, although he rides the most dangerous spot! To illustrate how rough it is back there, you'll recall how he used to get sick all of the time at Gulfport! Well, he never misses a day when he isn't sick! Yet, it is now so much of a routine that he says nothing, + carries an ammunition can as a receptacle. We never know when he's sick! (1/6/45)

Well, the birds are still walking, and of course the planes are still on the ground. It just keeps raining + raining all the time. The mud is over our heads, in places!

After mass, I ambled into the officer's Red Cross building, which is headquarters for everyone who ventures into Foggia. Thus, I proceeded to enlarge my understanding of the Italian viewpoint, when I engaged one of the Italian girls who works for the Red Cross. Although this girl had not studied English, she could speak it well; yet, some girls in the same building can't yet speak a word of the language!

This afternoon, I rode back in a G.I. ambulance with an English enlisted man who flies on the Wellington bombers. The English call the airplanes "kites." He said that B-17s are jolly good kites! This boy has been overseas for 3 years. Those Englishmen sure do have a rough time. They see plenty of action!

This afternoon, one of the boys who came over from Gulfport with us got a cable that his wife was the mother of a little girl; so, he was busy handing out a box of cigars that he had accumulated for the occasion!

Pack and be ready to go to the Isle of Capri tomorrow

Now, here's some big news. They came around + told Kiefer, Foster, myself, + 4 of the enlisted men to pack + be ready to go to the Isle of Capri, tomorrow! We're going to rest camp for 7 days!!! How about that!? It works on a rotation scheme, whereby each squadron sends so many each week to either Capri or Rome; and, its our turn I guess. So, they're going to fly us to Napoli tomorrow + we'll go over to Capri by boat. Then, the Red Cross takes us + puts us up in a fine hotel + treats us royally, for the week, in that fine resort mecca. So, here goes. I'll tell you all about it; and, I'll get to live like a human for a few days! (1/7/45)

R & R

Since the beginning of air force operations of the Eighth AF in 1942, combat fliers were sent for a week of R&R (relaxation and recuperation). These weeklong retreat spots were often called "flak farms." Airmen were sent there who were determined by their squadron flight surgeons to be suffering from symptoms of combat exhaustion, were at a midpoint in their tours, or had recently had a mind-shaking experience in the sky. Many flak farms in England were manor houses rented by their owners to the RAF or American units. The Red Cross had responsibility for running these homes. The homes were run as un-militarily as possible, and the importance of rank among the men was downplayed. The men were provided with recreation, lounging, and the royal carpet treatment. The rest week renewed the will of the men to continue to live. It may be little surprise that the fliers relaxed by talking about their greatest terrors, but as something that happened in another world. They would unravel the psychological trauma of the organized murder they were engaged in, as well as living constantly in the shadow of death. Some men returned from flak

farms having decided never again to board a four-engine bomber. They were transferred to ground jobs and were reduced in rank.[11]

> Standing on the lawn at the river's edge, three Air Force psychiatrists looked on like doting parents. "When those kids came here, they were on edge, nervous, tight all the way through," one of them commented. "They've been here, that bunch, four days. Look at them now. They're living again, not just existing." But part of living, the doctors should have known, was *not* forgetting about the war. Barbara Graves, director of the Red Cross's rest home division, understood this. In the unreal world airmen were thrown into, "a man came to think of his plane, his flying mates and his own skill or endurance as the only familiar elements he has to hold on to." She wrote in a report to Eighth Air Force command. "He attaches a tremendous importance to them and suffers when anything happens to them." To forget the war completely was to forget who you had become and who you count on when it mattered most. Not the understanding staff of a regal estate on the Thames, but nine other sacred men in a Fortress under fire.[12]

REST CAMP

Crews from the various Bomb Groups were sent to a pleasant area for rest, on a rotation basis. The most popular place for both the army and the airmen, in Italy, was the "Isle of Capri." Capri is an island in the Bay of Naples which developed into an international resort spot, during the pre WW-II days. It is very picturesque, with old castles dating back to the days of the Caesars. There [are] a number of resort hotels there, as well as an infinite number of gift shops and restaurants and entertainment places. Capri is a rocky, cliff-adorned island with only a couple of beaches. Up on

the highest point of land of the island was a castle where, the story goes, Augustus Caesar used to enjoy life.

The military had taken over a number of the hotels and restaurants so that the soldiers, sailors and airmen could enjoy themselves. It was pleasant and, we were there for a week. The officer group stayed in one hotel and the enlisted men stayed in another.

At Capri, we had the only opportunity during the tour of duty, to meet with and compare war stories with the army people. As part of the scene, we could take a ferry boat ride across the bay, back to Naples, there to wander around the city. The city had been disturbed by bombing. There was not much to do but act as visitors, visit the shops, etc. One of the highlights of a stroll down the Via Veneto, the main street in the city, would be a solicitation by a young boy to come visit his home where his mother, or his sister would make eggs and chips, for a small fee in U.S. military currency. Usually $.50 for eggs, potatoes and coffee.

One of the few cultural opportunities available was attending the opera at the San Carlos Opera House, in Naples. During the week we were there, I saw two beautiful renditions, "Madame Butterfly" and "The Barber of Seville." They were excellent. At the time, possibly still, the greatest opera performers are in Italy. Two of the prominent performers of the time were Beniamino Gili and Maria Caniglia, who appeared in Madam Butterfly.

Another highlight of the "Rest Camp" week in the Naples area was a tourist-type visit to Pompeii. Pompeii, as most everyone recalls, is a city at the base of Mt. Vesuvius, some 15-20 miles southeast of Naples, which was buried by an eruption of Vesuvius, in 70 B.C. Over the years, covering centuries, it has gradually been excavated by archaeologists to reveal the artifacts and cultural effects that give a representation of how life was in those times. The molten lava was so thick and sudden that it encased, and preserved, much of the architecture. Today, tour guides walk you through the city, pointing all these vital facts out – all sorts of relics: buildings, art, statues, chariots, horses, etc. You do get a taste for how it was, from the visit. Much is made of the chariots carrying barrels of

wine along the narrow streets (paths). My overall view of the visit to Pompeii is that it resembles what happens to be one of the few places in the world where the realities of the ancient history of man are enough evident to take a person beyond his imagination in looking at it. Vesuvius is still classified as "active" but it has not erupted for many years and never as violently as it did onto Pompeii.

Another memorable scene was the "Orange Grove Club," a fancy private club in Naples, taken over as an officer's club for the Allied military personnel. It was a place where officers from all of the Allied forces could go to relax. Sometimes, it was unfortunate that they served large quantities of alcohol; because, on many occasions, Army officers, out of jealousy or vanity, were anxious to convey to air officers as to "who won the war." With combat officers "letting their hair down." Sometimes "idle" discussions grew into bloody fights, stemming from the emotion created by the war circumstances and stimulated by the intake of booze. There was never any sense of fairness to these scenes. Typically the Air Corps people would represent themselves as the brighter, and more capable people and tend to look down on the "ground pounders" of the Army, in an effort to convince them that the war was being won in the air. On the other hand, many of the Army personnel had been in the war, overseas, for 5 years, all the way from the invasion of Africa to the battles in the Apennine Mountains in Italy. Meanwhile, the typical air crew member was only overseas for 6 to 10 months. There was no way that the war was won by the Air Corps. So, the clash in the psyche, here, was simply awful. Air bombardment was, overall, very important, but far less than a 50% factor in bringing about victory. And, [considering] the daily life of the infantry "doggie," living in foxholes, outside all the time with just about every inconvenience possible, there was no comparison between their personal sacrifice and the less-challenging every day, non-combat life of the air crewman. I suppose that since the beginning of time, there has always been jealousy between the various branches of the military services. It is the pride and spirit of achievement that makes military organizations be successful. So, it is human and natural for them to compete with each other for glory. (G.H.N., 1991)[13]

There were more deaths and fewer injuries among casualties of airmen versus ground troops, whereas among the numbers of infantry casualties, there was a higher percentage of wounded versus killed. The fact is not hard to explain. Planes were loaded with many tons of high-octane fuel and operated five miles above the earth. When a plane suffered a direct hit that resulted in an explosion on board, it was common for an entire crew to be lost. And *no one fell from a plane and survived without a parachute. Some were able to bail out, but others were not so fortunate. Ground fighting was most frequently dispersed so that killing occurred in fewer individuals at once. There were no medics in the air, and if an airman was wounded near the target, where most were, it would be many hours before he would receive treatment. Many men died on the return flights.[14]

*In reality, there *was* at least one exception. Ayres[15] tells the miraculous story of B-17 navigator Art Franchette of the 301st Bomb Group. Franchette was blown out of his Fortress when it exploded into flames over the Italian Alps on a mission to a refinery in northern Italy. Unconscious from the impact of the explosion, Franchette regained consciousness a thousand feet from the ground, too late for his chute to be effective. He had fallen 15–20,000 feet and slammed into a snowy mountain slope at 150 mph. Rescued by an Austrian woodsman living on the Italian side of the border, he endured near frostbite, capture by German soldiers, hours of transport in a cart over rugged terrain to a hospital, and imprisonment at a German stalag. He survived until the German surrender and returned home to share his incredible experience.

Good meals, beds with sheets and pillow cases and a good time in general

Tonight, if you were to come looking for me to bring me home to the hot biscuits as you used to do when I played with the boys down the street, you'd find me in a fine, modernistic, European hotel, high on top of the precipitous slopes of one of the world's most renowned, romantic resort

spots, even more so than The French Riviera, Miami Beach or Atlantic City (brrrr)! From our vantage point on the 2nd floor of the island's most luxurious hotel, the Quisisana, we can look across the beautiful Bay of Naples + see Vesuvius + Old Napoli lying like parts of a painter's panoramic drawing. Yes, for one week, I will be away from the strain + worry of the Air Force. Instead, I am perched up on one of the world's beauty spots, where we'll have good meals, beds with sheets + pillow cases + a good time in general. I just arrived, so I don't know what it will be like, yet!

It all began this morning, when a total of 22 of us were loaded onto one of the squadron's "Juke" ships for the trek to Napoli. A Juke ship is a plane with no guns, turrets or any other war equipment. It is still a B-17; but, there's seats in the bomb bay + in the radio room + in the waist. Anyhow, there would have been plenty of room for more than the 22 of us!! Anyhow, it felt very strange to be riding in the waist of this "Juke" ship. I couldn't stand it for long, and I went up + stood behind the pilot seat.

It took only 25 minutes to make the trip across Italy, over the mountains, to Napoli. Before landing at Capidichinni (Italy's greatest Airdrome); the fellow from the 342nd Squadron who was flying the plane took us right around the rim of Vesuvius, so that you could see where the steam + smoke emanates from. Then, we landed at that enormous field which the Air Transport Command uses for all its planes + supplies, these days. After we unloaded, we got onto trucks + went to the "Rest Camp Service Office" in Naples. There, we signed in + they gave us our "passport." Then, we were taken to a high class restaurant + given a fine meal.

After that, at one o'clock, we went down to the docks + boarded an excursion boat for the 2 hr. trip across the Bay of Naples. It was quite a pleasant trip, and they even served us coffee + doughnuts because it was a bit raw. At 4:30, we landed and got off the boat amidst that typical Italian seaport atmosphere. Then, we boarded the funicular railroad for the 10 minute trip up the precipice to the hotel. So, here I am! It is dark, now; so, I'll wait until tomorrow to see the town.

11:00 p.m. It was like eating at the Statler Hotel, tonight, honestly! White table cloths, plenty of everything, polite Italian waiters, etc. It was

also nice to get into some good clothes + eat all dressed-up. Then, the Red Cross had a dance which lasted 'til now! More news tomorrow, from this wonderland. (1/8/45)

In his own words, Capri was a "true wonderland" for George and his crewmen. The men (Neilson, Kiefer, and Foster) slipped into the lap of luxury: barbershop shaves, shopping, exotic food, entertainment, sleeping in, and sunshine. It must have seemed like a different planet from the muddy tent city at Foggia.

The waiters fall all over you in their anxiety to put all the courses before you at the proper time. Everything is served in the most elaborate + refined style that you can imagine. (1/9/45)

The hosts at Capri's upscale shops and businesses had "the air of learned peoples," wrote George. "It seems that everyone on Capri can speak five or six languages, fluently." He shopped for a mother of pearl necklace for Ma along with other gifts unavailable at the PX. They took a horse and buggy ride to see the sites of the island. They toured the ornate and treasure-laden ancient LaChiesa de San Michele church, the Italian counterpart of the renowned Mont Ste. Michelle in France. They also gawked at Mussolini's summer villa, prompting a political reflection:

The people of Capri no longer respect or care for Mussolini, because he built up the place while he was here; but, he left their cause flat, when Italy collapsed + nobody was free to visit Capri. Their sole "life line" is their tourist trade, you see. So they have their special reason for disliking Benito! (1/9/454)

Conceding that governments in Italy change like the seasons in New England, Mussolini's downfall was not a particularly startling thing except that he was aligned with Hitler and was, like the German fuehrer, a fascist. The island of Capri had fallen on bad times before "the Americans took over and began to foot

the bill" according to George's understanding from the locals. But even on beautiful Capri, the war was not far away.

She went to college near Wiener-Neustadt, which the Allies have wiped out

Around supper time, we engaged our chamber maid in conversation! She's a woman of about 45 who is an Austrian, born + brought up in Vienna. She went to college near *Wiener-Neustadt, which the Allies have wiped out because of the Messerschmitt factory. (1/9/45)
*a section of Vienna

Spending the next day "clambering up and down the rocks and cliffs" of the island, they ended up at the top of one of Italy's primary weather stations, overlooking the Sorrento Peninsula at the gateway to the Bay of Naples. There, they encountered four Italian sailors.

There, we became engaged in conversation with 4 Italian boys who wear "Reggia Marina" (Royal Navy) on their blue sailor hats. They represent practically all that is left of the Italian navy, I guess. They are still employed by the Italian government to forecast weather for the Naples' area + to spot airplanes + ships in the area! Needless to say, they are totally discouraged at their jobs; because, they are stuck on an island outpost + they cannot quit!
(1/10/45)

A dance was held in which a female pool was cobbled together with Italian and American Red Cross girls, nurses, and some native young ladies. Capri, with its luxurious life, was an enigma in a land ravaged by war and poverty. But it lacked one of the creature comforts of American life:

The one sad feature of this place is that there's not a drop of heat on Capri. Whereas we had a gasoline stove to heat our tent, we have nothing here. So, everyone has cold feet. (1/10/45)

He said that the Allies are at fault for giving Italy back to the Fascisti

Then, yesterday, Foster + I engaged another Italian man in conversation. He had been a political prisoner of the Fascisti, for 20 years, because he was one of Italy's "Red" followers. He seems to be a very learned man. He said that the revolution in Italy is inevitable + it won't be long either! When it comes, says he, there will be an awful lot of blood flowing in Italy. The reason for it is that when the Americans gave the gov't back to the Italians, they gave it right back to the ruthless Fascists, the ones who control the wealth + business of Italy. Consequently, the poor people (the majority) are worse off than before the war! He said that hundreds of people die each day of starvation; and, the people don't want to stand it any longer. The trouble with the Fascists, now, is that they won't work + they only deal in the black market with goods that are meant for all the Italians. The Fascists buy up this stuff + put such a price on it that the ordinary people cannot afford it! He said that the Allies are at fault for giving Italy back to the Fascisti. However, there'll soon be more Fascists, he says! This man also predicts the fall of Germany, as soon as the Russians join up with the Americans, on the Adriatic. That, they'll do as soon as Budapest falls. [It had already fallen]. (1/12/45)

After seven days on Capri, George was ready to return to duty. The weather was cold and rainy and he was tired of shivering. So he spent the last day watching movies in the hotels. He mentioned that a number of aviation songs had been written by the patrons of Capri during the war. These expressed the scorn that combat men held for the Air Transport Command and other opinions like the war between the B-17 and the B-24 that the airmen frequently engaged in. Some of the titles were *Boxcar, Flying Meat Wagon, Stratosphere Bath-Tub, Plumber's Nightmare, and Flying Booby Trap,* all honoring the B-24.

Just to check on the mail situation, I haven't missed a day of writing. So, let me know if they all arrive, sooner or later! (1/13/45)

Neilson and Foster visited the ruins of the castle of Emperor Tiberius Caesar, built "by Augustus Caesar and remodeled by his tyrant son, Tiberius. It was destroyed by earthquake and Vesuvius lava." (1/14/45) They saw all the palatial villas of nobility, including Mussolini and Mrs. Williams, of the Williams Shaving Cream Company. Mussolini had only spent one day at Capri. He was too busy for his villa. Twenty miles to the northeast, the visitors saw Salerno, where the Allied landings had occurred in September 1943.

The guide told how he watched the Allied task force standing out to sea, + then how 300 to 400 ships began the bombardment + invasion of Salerno. No missiles were fired at Capri! (1/14/45)

The last day the three officers spent on Capri was most unusual, and again illustrates the extreme contrasts and almost unimaginable experiences that one can have in the armed forces. What happened to these three opportunists is a story too precious to abridge.

It seemed like a family gathering – two girls and three of us dining in the villa of a Prince of Italy

"Isle of Golden Dreams" Sunday Afternoon, Jan. 14

I believe that my story on this "dreamboat" was climaxed in a "noble" manner, today, when I had dinner at the Villa which belonged to Prince Umberto (son of King [Victor] Emmanuelle) + his Princess. How do you like that? Now, here's the story!

Several of the Red Cross girls who came over on the boat with us are stationed here on Capri. Naturally, Kiefer had made good friends with these girls on the boat. So, when we landed here on Capri, we had an advantage, or at least Kiefer did. Then, it seems that these girls live in groups of 5 at several of the choice villas which have been vacated by the nobility.

They have the maids + servants that go with the villa + the villa is supplied with Army rations. Now, two of the girls, Barbara + Jean, invited Kiefer, Foster + I to their villa, which happens to be the "Villa Marum," which once belonged to the Royal Family!

So, up we went at noon this morning + opened the heavy wooden gates that lead through the wall which surrounds the garden of the villa, and, there it was, a great, white building with many square windows + square corners, like all the Mexican + Italian villas. It is all white mortar, outside and inside.

The first room we saw was the living room. It was all white mortar, except the red tile floor. They had oil paintings hung on the wall; and, the furniture consisted of 6 deep-soft divans + one large coffee table. The room had an air of immaculate cleanliness, simplicity + richness, all combined. Oh, yes, the one light in the room was a modern, indirect lamp!

Then, when "Louise," who was the Princess's maid, rang a soft bell, the two girls + the 3 of us adjourned to the dining room! The dining room reminded us strictly of old Roman architecture. Everything was hard + of marble, except the chairs which surrounded the long, multicolored table. It was really like eating in a barren, cold, marble hall. We ate from some of the royal china, I might add, also.

Then, the maid brought in the food. Guess what?!! The Red Cross girls have made it a point to become friends with the mess sergeants at the Quisisana Hotel, where they draw their rations! So, they generally get the "food fit for the kings." Anyhow, we had steak + French fried potatoes, + an Italian green salad, with bread, butter, oranges + nuts. Everything was served from the finest service. Believe me, it was the nicest atmosphere that I've ever eaten in, since I've been in the army. It was truly the nearest I've come to eating like home. The two girls were really nice to us; and, we told them how pleased were to have such an opportunity to eat like that. They were glad for that, too! It seemed like a family gathering – two girls + 3 of us dining in the villa of a Prince of Italy. I couldn't do justice to a description of the atmosphere of that villa. It is all so strange, yet rich, beautiful + ancient! I felt as if I was in a Roman dining room. The table was brilliantly + naturally colored in marble; so, there was more than the plain, marble colors. The entire day was a wonderful experience! The big bay window in the dining hall overlooked the Bay, 1000 ft. below.

Ma, a sight like that was truly marvelous. Not only that, we took 2 hours to eat dinner + it was so different from everyday life in the army, even everyday life on Capri! (1/14/45)

Continuing his propensity to talk to the locals and do his own historical analysis, George wrote:

After asking all non-military concerned people on Capri about how the Germans treated them, the answer is as good, if not better than the Americans. The girls say that they are neater + more like gentlemen in their manners. To illustrate, Jones (the radio man) has been dining each night with the family of a shop keeper (a girl) all because he told them he was of German extraction! They can't seem to feed him enough spaghetti, etc.

Tonight, I had my last bit of Capri's festivities by attending the picture called "Devotion." It is yet to come around in the States + is a high class picture, featuring Olivia DeHavilland + Ida Lupino. It is the story of the Bronte sisters, Charlotte + Emily, who wrote "Jayne Eyre" + "Wuthering Heights," respectively. (1/14/45)

So the week on the beautiful island of Capri was over and George and his crew returned to the mudded plain back at Foggia. The rest of January would be an almost continuous round of rain, wind, and cold. Almost every day, the men were woken and called to briefing, but the mission was canceled before takeoff. This was annoying to the men, as they were anxious to get on with what they were there to do and complete their required missions. As it was, they spent most of the time in their tents or clubs as January in Italy passed.

We learned that all we missed was a week of bad weather, rain and mud

Monday Evening
Jan. 15
"In Foggia, dammit!"

Well, my vacation came to a close this morning, when we got off Capri's *funicular railroad + boarded an army rescue boat, which happened to be on hand. This boat took us madly across the Bay of Naples at no less than 40 miles per hour! I've never been so fast, in a boat. The trip across the water was like going across Marblehead Harbor on a bright, sunny morning!

After waiting around the Red Cross in Naples, we got a truck ride out to Capadichinni for our plane ride home! Oh, yes, I saw two lady majors buying coffee + doughnuts at the Red Cross on the Via Roma, in Naples. Believe me, they looked the part, too! I had never seen women above the rank of 1st Lt. before! If they look like these did, I don't care if I do again, either!

Today, Naples looked more up-and-coming. The streets were clean, people had finer clothes + the shops looked more like Boston's Tremont Street. Evidently, Italy is struggling to its feet again!

Back at the field, we learned that all we missed was a week of bad weather, rain + mud. On my bed, I found a whole raft of mail which had accumulated during my absence - one from Randy Martin, who is now in England on Boxcars. There was also one from Lenny Pendell, my instructor at Blytheville. Guess where he is!? He's on Leyte', in the Philippines. He, too, is on B-24s. You should read the description of the tents, the mosquitoes, the rain, etc. Since I must fly tomorrow, I put all the goods aside + now, after this letter, I'll be in bed. The boys have done quite a job on the last box of Anna Mack's chocolates!, tonight. (1/15/45)
*a cable-driven railway

This morning, we got up + were briefed for a "big" target; but, we never got off the ground. The weather was bad + they shot the red flare from the control tower, as soon as we had our engines started + were ready to taxi. Most fellows think that the hardest part of the mission is accomplished by the time you take off! (1/16/45)

Still the rain pours down! It has now rained for 7 out of the last 9 days + about 18 out of the 24 days since Christmas. All of this has been snow for the boys in the front lines of northern Italy. So, it could be worse, I guess.

You can imagine how German fighter pilots feel when 9/10 get shot down

Everyone has a cold, including me. Consequently, I spent the day in bed nursing mine, with the help of the 3 pills every 4 hours which the flight surgeon prescribed! It was one of the few times I have ever stayed in bed, and, I only got up to eat my meals! Colds, in this stage of the game, have to be carefully taken care of; because, a cold is no good, at high altitude.

You can imagine how German fighter pilots feel these days when 9/10 of all that go up, get shot down! But still, their limiting factor is not airplanes, but gasoline. Their ingenuity in putting their industry underground enables them to build-up their plane reserves. As long as we hit those oil targets, the operation of these planes will be slowly but surely choked off! (1/17/45)

He was right. Albert Speer, German armaments minister and chief of the war production economy, kept planes rolling off the assembly lines by the thousands each month almost to the end of the war. They were even literally moving manufacturing underground as the air war raged. While a lot of hope was placed in jet-powered Turbos, that program had stumbled because of the incompetent interference by Adolf Hitler, who insisted that the Me262 jet be outfitted as a high-speed bomber.[16]

If the Russians can move across the plainlands, it won't be long in Europe

Right now, we are all watching the Russian offensive in Poland. They are headed right towards Prague + the province of Silesia. When the Russians get into Silesia, they'll get the great oil refineries which are

in the Blechhammer complex. If they get them, then only Brux will remain, and Hitler's days will be numbered. It is all a question of oil, right now! For over a year, the 8th has been pounding Leuna, Magdeburg, + Merseburg, while the 15th has pounded Brux, Blechhammer, + Odertal! If the Russians can move across the plainlands in their current offensive, well, Ma, it won't be long in Europe! For, once Hitler's synthetic oil system collapses, his Wehrmacht will have to stop dead! It is as plain as that!

So, far, the German ingenuity has been able to replace its bombed out oil refineries as fast as they crumble. But, their number is finally coming up! This is my first optimistic prediction! Remember, the heavy bombers have been allowing German plants to continue production, with the knowledge that Germany is done, without its oil! (1/17/45)

Erhard Milch, Nazi minister of air armaments, deputy of Hermann Goering and cofounder of the Luftwaffe with the same, reflected this precise view:

> "The synthetic oil plants are the worst possible place they could hit us," he warned Central Planning during the spring of 1943. "With them stands or falls our very ability to fight this war. After all, if the synthetic fuel plants are effectively attacked, not only our aircraft but the tanks and submarines will also come to a standstill."[17]

The synthetic plants were more vulnerable than the natural refineries because they required larger installations and could not be dispersed in smaller plants as easily. Furthermore, they were located within a fairly limited region near the largest coal reserves, particularly in Silesia.

I guess that I never explained the duties of an operations officer. Well, here goes. Our new operations officer, since a previous Capt. Shelton completed his tour, is Capt. Michael. Capt. Michael comes from *Newton. You could think of him being the "coach" of the team! He decides on who will fly which position, he makes up the daily schedule of combat +

training flights, he observes who flies well + how they fly in each position, he recommends the promotions, he observes the squadron's formation as a whole, he offers the incentives for good formation flying + it is his duty to keep his crews happy + content. He is usually a more experienced pilot than the rest. (1/17/45)
*west suburb of Boston.

MISSION #9 AND #10 – BROD AND GRAZ

January, 1945 brought almost continuous bad weather. This meant that, often times, when we were assigned to fly, we would have to go through the usual: wake-up, breakfast, get your spirits together, go to briefing, only to find that the mission was being canceled, usually by a flare near the flight control tower, during the time when we were preparing to start the engines on the planes. There was cause to rejoice and plan a day of going into Foggia to get some laundry done or just get away from the tent area.

Two of the targets, Brod, in Yugoslavia, and Graz, in Austria resulted from cancelled trips to the big oil refineries of Brux and Blechhammer, in [present day] Poland. Both of these were short trips to relatively small cities, where it was deemed vital to destroy railroad marshalling yards, to disturb the flow of supplies to the Germans in Yugoslavia. Both of these targets were within 100 miles of each other.

Always, after landing, we were interviewed for a few minutes by intelligence officers, after which the Red Cross ladies served us coffee and doughnuts, followed by a return to our tent area. There, the officer members of the crew would evolve their own critique, however informal, of the day's mission, in the privacy of the tent. Naturally, we would unwind and reveal our personal thoughts about everything, including how we felt the lead crews and planes conducted themselves, including whatever discrepancies had evolved. Then, after dinner in our "Nissen Hut" dining room, we would sometimes enjoy tid-bits – cookies and brownies, sent from home. (G.H.N., 1991)[18]

The Fifteenth did send out planes on the four previous days, attacking oil refineries and marshalling yards in Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Yugoslavia but George's squadron did not participate until January 19.

So, this mission was actually in support of the Russians in the Balkans

Today, we finally got into the air, again. They wanted to go to Vienna; but, there was a weather front over the Alps; so, they briefed us on an alternate plan, just in case they found it impossible to reach Vienna! Then, they waited until the very last minute, in fact 'til we were in the airplanes before they decided that it would be impossible to get beyond the Alps. You see, last minute plans always depend upon a weather reconnaissance plane, a P-38, which goes into Germany or Austria every morning in the pre-dawn hours.

Anyhow, the alternate plan was to hit the rail yards at the city of Brod, in north-eastern Yugo! The Russians consider Brod as one of the key communication points in the German retreat from the Balkans. So, this mission was actually in support of the Russians in the Balkans.

Brod is not too long a distance from here, so, it was a case of circling + circling to gain altitude over the field, instead of climbing on course, as we do en route to Germany! We reached 20,000 ft. right over Foggia; so, it was merely a matter of gaining 3,000 ft. on the 300 mile trip over to Brod. We left Foggia at 12:15, went over Yugo + got back by 3 o'clock. They shot at us, of course, but they didn't have many guns so they were not accurate enough to bother.

The city was so snow-bound that it took the radar man to find the target

All in all, we were in the air just 7 hours, although we could have gone, by ourselves, in about 3 ½ hours, right from the field. Today, Yugoslavia was blanketed with snow, everywhere. Evidently, it was a new, deep fall of snow; for, we could hardly make out the city of Brod. There were no houses or buildings visible. The city was so snow-bound that it took the

radar man to find the target, although there were no clouds to hamper visibility. Kiefer + I + the crew flew in the No. 4 position of the squadron, as we have been doing, lately!

By the way, we had no fighter escort into Yugo, today. So, it felt rather lonesome. You see, the Germans have no fighters based near Brod; and, Intelligence didn't figure them for fighters, today. (1/19/45)

(See Appendix I-9)

At present, the Russian spearhead is aimed north of this region, across Silesia to Breslau, where much of Germany's remaining manufactures are! We are waiting for the spearhead to spread out + engulf Blechhammer! For a while, things will be very much in a muddle until the Krauts take up their defense lines + attempt to make a stand. Then, we'll see what's left! (1/20/45)

The Blechhammer oil complex consisted of two large plants, north and south of each other with about a mile in between. The labor camp there was a satellite of the infamous extermination camp at Auschwitz in southern Poland.[19]

Today the entire Air Force went after Vienna in a "maximum effort" attack on the oil refineries in the suburbs of Vienna.

I hope that somebody lets me know as soon as any indication is in the offing as to where Bob might be going. I haven't written to him, because it is senseless to have mail chasing here, there + everywhere

Still, no feeling of Sunday, especially when everyone gets out on the road when the planes are landing, to be sure they all come home. It's quite a feeling of anxiety, "sweating them out," on the edge of the runway! (1/20/45)

It was tradition for the fliers who remained on base during a mission to go out and greet or "sweat in" the returning planes, ready to assist with dead and wounded comrades as well as show support.

"—And the wind blew, the snow fell – on through the day!" The wind has been howling + whistling just like it does at home during January. Besides, it has been just as cold as it is at home. It also has been snowing, which is unusual for southern Italy. So, you can see why the mission scheduled for today was "scratched." We never even finished with briefing, when it was called off!

Today is the day when we really have enjoyed our "silent-glow" gasoline stove more than ever. It has been going full tilt all day long; and, we've been eating toast, + chocolates, + playing bridge. It gives quite a feeling of comfort + snugness to be warm while the snow + wind howls around the tent outside!

The whole shootin'-match lurched, and the stove pipe swayed dangerously

Anyhow, the weather took a sudden change about 5 o'clock yesterday morning; and, it almost felt like a hurricane! We were awakened by the flapping of the canvas on top of the tent, in addition to the creaking, groaning + lurching of the wall. The first awakening I got was when a can of grapefruit juice came off the shelf + hit me on the stomach. It was quickly followed by a can of peanuts. Then, my writing pad came down + whacked the floor! Realizing something was doing, Foster + I got up + sized up the situation. Immediately, we recalled that we had neglected to stake down the wall of the tent, when we had promised ourselves that we would, on a previous occasion. But, it was too early in the morning, too rainy, too windy + too cold to do anything about it, then. So, what did we do? We took turns leaning against the center of the wall, in order to relieve the strain. Meanwhile, the whole shootin'-match lurched, + the stove pipe swayed dangerously. With that, we shut off the stove to forestall any accident of a fire. Then, we started praying for the wind to subside, as we slowly began to freeze, in our abbreviated clothing. All the while, Dunn, who had previously agreed to the job of staking down that side of the tent, slept placidly on! Then, just about the time when we were getting desperately mad, the wind stopped + we turned the stove back on + went to bed, again! When we finally got up in the morning, the first thing Dunn

did was put some stakes + ropes on the windward side of the tent! Now, we don't have to worry about the side of the tent croaking on us!

Our enlisted men seem to stick together very well; I happened to pick up their mail + brought it to their tent, today. They have a rabbit for a pet. He never leaves the tent + he always huddles around the fire! (1/21/45)

The episode sounded more like a winter camping trip than a war, but it was all part of saving the world from tyranny. It underscores the fact that war, for individual servicemen, vacillates between intense moments of extreme excitement followed by long periods of boredom, which itself spawns a thousand ways men find to combat it.

All morning long, the snowball battle raged

We awoke this morning at 5:00 + proceeded to briefing just as if we were going to fly. However, it was like one of those winter mornings when Betty rushes out to take pictures of all the branches + snow-covered fences. We had a 6 inch fall of snow last night + it was still snowing this morning.

As soon as we returned from briefing (where the mission was officially canceled), we began to play in the snow! All morning long, the snowball battle raged. Soon, it resolved itself into a hand-to-hand encounter between the combat men + the "ground-grippers." The battle roared up + down the rows of tents, with up to 50 men taking part in the engagement. We had attacks + counterattacks for 3 hours. Every time a new tent was "captured," the fellows cheered as if they had retaken a German town! Snowballs whistled through the doors + several panes of glass were broken in the mess-hall. Some fellows rolled their snowballs in puddles to make them icy + hard. Some fun!!! Boy! A man's life wasn't worth a plug nickel for a while. The colonel walked out of [the] operations office carrying a thermos jug filled with water. He walked directly into the line of fire + his jug was knocked out of his hand like a bowling pin. That wasn't so funny but he tripped+ fell right beside it. Then, he picked himself up + continued on his journey! Later, a jeep full of men started for town + they were saturated with snow, before they ever left the squadron! I've never

seen such a snow fight! The thing continued until it finally petered out + spent itself.

Well, everybody in the tent is rather bitter tonight! We have plenty of bread; but, we were unable to steal any butter from the mess-hall, this evening. And, we are all rather tired of eating orange marmalade. I guess that orange marmalade has been on the table every day since I entered the army!

On rush the Russians! I hope that they cross the Oder River before the Germans slow them down! But, I've enclosed 3 pertinent clippings from "Stars + Stripes"; so, you can use your own judgment. For this evening, then, *"Bonne soiree." (1/23/45)

*French, good night

This afternoon, the weather cleared up; and, they nailed Kiefer and I for a practice instrument mission, before we could sneak into town! So, we flew up + down the spur + wasted 2 hours watching the waves break on the rocks. It is actually a pleasure to go on a "U.S.O." mission + not have to sweat things out. Then, too, you don't feel much like doing anything but cruise around. (1/24/45)

George continued to inquire after the location of his brother, Bob, who had recently been advanced to the rank of Captain in the 10th Mountain Division infantry, Fifth Army, which had been deployed to northern Italy.

10th MOUNTAIN DIVISION, U.S. ARMY

During this winter period, the 10th Mountain Division had become the spearhead of the U.S. 5th Army in northern Italy. The 10th Mountain Division had been in training since early in the war. Originally, the personnel had been recruited from amongst the finest skiers in the country: champion college skiers, ski meisters, men who managed ski resorts and training schools. They came from the Rocky Mountain resort areas like Colorado, [as well as from] Wyoming, California, and New Hampshire. For example, Herbie Schneider was recruited from the Cranmore Mountain

Ski School, North Conway, N.H. [My Sister] Betty Neilson knew Herbie and his father, Hans, who had been brought to North Conway by a N.Y. banker, to create America's first ski resort and school, in 1938. Hans Schneider, in turn, was a refugee from the German Nazi situation.

Prior to the 5th Army being in northern Italy, there had never been an opportunity to use the ski troops in WWII. Thus, the 10th Mountain Division experienced three phases of retraining, over a 3 year period prior to their being put into action in Italy. Finally, they were trained as mountain troops, without skis. They were committed to battle in August, 1944 for the purpose of creating the final breakthrough from the Apennine Mountains, to let the Allies get into the Po River valley, near Bologna, and finish the war in southern Europe.

[My] brother Robert Neilson, an infantry captain by August, 1944, was now a member of the 10th Mountain Division, as a company commander. He had started his service as a member of the 1st Infantry Division, the "Yankee Division" from Massachusetts. In 1942, he shipped from Massachusetts to the Solomon Islands where the Army joined the Marines in the very difficult fighting in the jungle of Guadalcanal and Colombangara. Bob went over as a private, during the battle period. He was selected for and attended Officer's Training School in Bougainville, a nearby island. He returned to Guadalcanal as a 2nd Lt.

During the activity at Guadalcanal, Bob contracted malaria, which forced his evacuation as a casualty. Thereafter, as an early returnee from the fighting, Bob was assigned to three army bases in the U.S. One of the assignments was being an Officer's Club manager, which did not appeal to a former combat officer. After 18 months of assignments in the U.S., as a combat veteran, Bob found that being a combat veteran, as well as a casualty did not command respect. Rather it attracted jealousy and envy and kept him in an uncomfortable mood. Finally, he had an opportunity to apply for assignment in the "crack" 10th Mountain Division, as a captain.

So, it developed that sometimes, when we were flying to Germany or Austria, that we were flying with a load of bombs

directly over positions where my brother was located, in the mountains. (G.H.N., 1991)[20]

One of the groups in the Fifteenth was assigned to weather reconnaissance. Its job was to fly to the target area just before a planned mission and radio weather information back to Foggia.[21]

Last minute weather instructions come from a P-38 weather plane which goes over the target areas every morning, early. As soon as the plane lands in Bari, the big wheels in the Air Force make a final decision which is telegraphed to the various wings and groups

So, we came back to the squadron + Kiefer + I got nicked, for the second day in a row, for an instrument practice ride. You see, the squadron has a training schedule which they must comply with each day! Everybody in every squadron has no desire to fly practice missions in between combat missions. Yet, the command is becoming more + more like a training command. So, it becomes the squadron's operations officer's duty to scare up enough crews for these "U.S.O" missions which the group plans: practice formations, practice instruments, and practice bombing missions.

We nearly ran into 3 mountains to find out the principle of this new-fangled altimeter

Therefore, on days that there is no mission, everybody tries to hide or go to town or stay out of [the] way of the operations officers. It is just like looking for men for details, (K.P., etc.). The operations officer, himself, doesn't want to fly + he knows the boys don't care about it. But, what can he do? The Air Force has decided upon an increase in the coordinated training, between combat missions. So, whenever someone gets "hooked" for a U.S.O. mission, he usually boards the truck midst the hee haws + cat calls of his buddies! Then, of course, everybody who takes off on a U.S.O. mission buzzes the tent area just to let them know about it! The runway is aimed right at the tent area, conveniently enough!

Anyway, we cruised around the Foggia valley between Bari + Foggia, trying to get some good music on the radio! Then we spent quite a bit of

time trying to unwind the complexities of one of the new radio altimeters which happened to be in the plane we had. Foster knows very little about it + Kiefer + I know less; so, we nearly ran into 3 mountains in our effort to find out the principle of this new-fangled radio altimeter.

This afternoon, I received 3 letters, one from Barbara, one from Eddie + one from Mary! Eddie wrote his on Jan. 8, from Saipan. He spoke of having a good time over the holidays even though the Japs pay them frequent visits.

Oh, yes! I took a shower today, one of my weekly showers! A shower is more of an ordeal than a comfort, around here, so, the doors to the shower room are never overcrowded.

P.S. Here's a propaganda leaflet that we would have dropped in Austria, today. (1/25/45)

The German language leaflet was in the form of a newsletter and was titled *Rot-Weiss-Rot (Red-White-Red)* and appeared to be produced by an organization promoting a free, independent Austria. It was published by the Fifteenth Air Force. The colors red and white obviously refer to the colors of the Austrian flag and shield. Two statements in the title line of the paper state, "The governments of Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States ... wish for the reestablishment of a free and independent Austria ..." and "In the final analysis, the great contribution by Austria to its own freedom will be firmly considered" (Moscow, 1943). The paper contains accounts and pictures of Allied movements at Germany's doorstep, including a picture of American sentries on the left bank of the Rhine River. Other reports refer to the progress of various London-based underground movements of different European states. The message overall seemed clear: "It's over; give it up."[22]

This mental tenseness and anticipation on the ground drives fellows "to the barn"

Day after day, you see, the missions are cancelled. I don't believe that our group has had more than 5 missions during the month! Still in all, there has only been 2 days when the fellows did not go to briefing! Perhaps you

think that this preparation, this waiting, this alertness + all the concerned sitting around doesn't have a bad effect on the morale. Everyone gets so jittery that they can't sleep, waiting for the wake-up man to come around. This mental tenseness + anticipation on the ground drives fellows "to the barn." Believe me, one of the major problems here is to provide oneself with adequate varieties of recreation + amusement so that the case of nerves doesn't set in. As for me, I still have not found the answer to the question! I wish that someone would concoct a solution that would dissolve all those nerve-wearing thoughts that fill a fellow's mind, as he sits around thinking about combat. The best thing, I know, is the movies; but, transportation to Foggia is so bad that it becomes impractical most of the time! (1/27/45)

For the 7th consecutive day, it rained + blew + was raw + was cold! I don't believe that there has been more than 20 flying days in the 80 odd days that I've been with the squadron! Front after front sweeps across Europe and the worst weather generally settles in the Mediterranean area where low pressures prevail + "suck" the bad weather in this direction. As soon as one system of storms passes or spends itself, another moves in and replaces it. You can almost watch the tail end of one line of clouds pass into the southeast as another moves in from the northwest!

We've been waiting for you

This morning was one of the few mornings when the boys didn't have to rise + report for briefing. More than likely, the situation became ridiculous through the night; so, they decided it would be silly to brief the boys. Besides, whomever is in the habit of keeping Axis-Sally informed about the targets would only have another golden opportunity to radio her our target! It is common for her to know where we are continually briefed to go, on days that we never get off the ground. Then, she broadcasts to the boys in the 15th Air Force to "Come on up to Vienna, tomorrow. We've been waiting for you, you've been scheduled to go to Vienna for several days. As soon as the weather clears, we'll be looking for you!" Evidently, there's a leak somewhere in the higher offices. For, the Germans know a lot about the air forces operations, targets, etc. Although they check each crew off before it enters briefing, everybody sees these Italians sitting

around the briefing room where all the target information is listed on the blackboard! So, one day, one of the navigators stepped up to an intelligence officer + asked if he had checked-off the "Italian crew" which just went out, a very caustic remark, to say the least! (1/28/45)

The Russians are nearly as close to Berlin as we are to Napoli

Meanwhile, everybody's rooting for the Russians and hoping that they get to Berlin ahead of the Americans. For, if they do, things will be properly handled, you can bet! Just now, the Russians are nearly as close to Berlin as we are to Napoli! How about that? Don't think that the fall of Berlin will necessarily mean the end of the war, either! For, Berlin is only a heap of rubbish anyhow, now! The climax all depends on how soon the Americans + the Russians meet inside Germany + then fan out into all quarters of the Reich! (1/28/45)

It was inevitable that the Russians would capture Berlin, close as it was to Germany's eastern border. Though the division of Germany into occupation zones was settled at the Yalta Conference in February, no provision had been made regarding which armies would seize Berlin, or any other territory. Although the western Allies were nearly as far from Berlin as the Red Army, Eisenhower made the pragmatic decision to halt the Anglo-American offensive and allow the Soviets to capture the city. His reasons were first, to prevent the unnecessary casualties that would likely occur if the Soviet and western armies met in an unplanned movement and second, he recognized that U.S. and British troops would have to abandon most of Berlin after the armistice to honor the Yalta agreements on the division of Germany and Berlin.[23]

I believe that you'll find that the mail is slow in coming to you because most of it goes by boat during this bad weather! The A.T.C. boys who fly the planes across the ocean can't get up in this weather any more than we can! If you could see the daily weather maps, you'd have a picture of the type of weather which envelopes Europe during most of the winter!

I seem to get everything I need or send for. But, as long as you are anxious to send things to me, how about some Ping-Pong balls so that I can contribute my share to the quality of balls which I help to break each day at the club! The only balls we get are what the fellows get from home + what we steal from the Red Cross in Foggia! I don't actually mean steal; but, you know how things like that can be appropriated!

So, for tonight, my parting words are to invite you to read or glance at more of the adventures of "Private Sad Sack," whose serial number is 000 001. (1/28/45)

Sad Sack was artist George Baker's G.I. cartoon character who sported a helmet, a rifle, and a few days growth of whiskers, the ever tired, forlorn foot soldier. The comic portrayed life on the front lines in a humorous way, providing a light treatment to the miseries of the men away at war. Certainly anyone who has served in the armed forces has at one time or another seen Sad Sack in his or her own predicament.[24]

The 235 lb. Dane is headed for India again

Guess who I heard from today? It was Don Lonstrup, my old friend from Helena. He is at Palm Springs in California, waiting to be checked out in the famed C-47 type cargo plane. He expects to be assigned to the perilous "Hump" route of cargo planes from India to China, one of the more glorified + the only dangerous task which the A.T.C. undertakes in this wartime flying! In other words, the 235 lb. Dane is headed for India again! He told me that he happened to be the first one in the A.T.C. to fly one of the newest model P-47s, at Christmas time. Lonstrup is a fine man + I'll always remember him. Even now, I remember his flying advice!

For the 8th consecutive day, the "birds" did not get off the ground. This time, it was the extreme cold + icing clouds. I have not been on the schedule for the past few days; so, it has not been wearing on my nerves like the others who spend the night tossing + waiting to be called for briefing! I got an hour in the Link Trainer, this morning, for a long, lost change.

This evening, I happened to spot a truck headed for town, to a U.S.O. show, so I hopped on without question. The result was that Foster + I saw

a delectable, highly talented + enjoyable stage show at the Flagella. They had a classic singer, a fine marionette artist, a very clever clay sculptor + some other very fine talent! (1/29/45)

You can't walk down the highway without fear of being hit by a reckless G.I.

Finally, the birds got off the ground, today! None of our crew was on the schedule though! Having played quite a game of basketball on the previous day, I was what you might call, "hors de combate," today, stiff from head to foot! It proved my obvious need for more physical exercise, quite conclusively! Yet, it's pretty difficult to find something to do, with the prevailing mud conditions putting a stop to any outdoor form of recreation that might ordinarily [be] feasible. You can't walk down the highway, without fear of being hit by a reckless G.I. driver! Why, the 61st Station Hospital in Foggia has far more casualties from auto + truck accidents than it does from combat activity!

Tonight, in the club, all the "big wheels" are "rolling the bones" in their monthly effort to double or treble their paycheck. One guy will treble his, probably, but, two more will undoubtedly be losers! It's usually married men that are in on the games, too!

Other than the crap game, I guess another feature of today is that the food has been increasingly poor, during the past few weeks! No special reason that I can see, except that it is common knowledge that the Fascisti (sons of - *!! -) have edged their way into positions in the Naples port; and, everyone knows that the Italian Fascists, few as they may be, are still in operation! So, draw your own conclusions (But, don't let it out of the house that I suggested anything; it may be not so important as it sounds!)

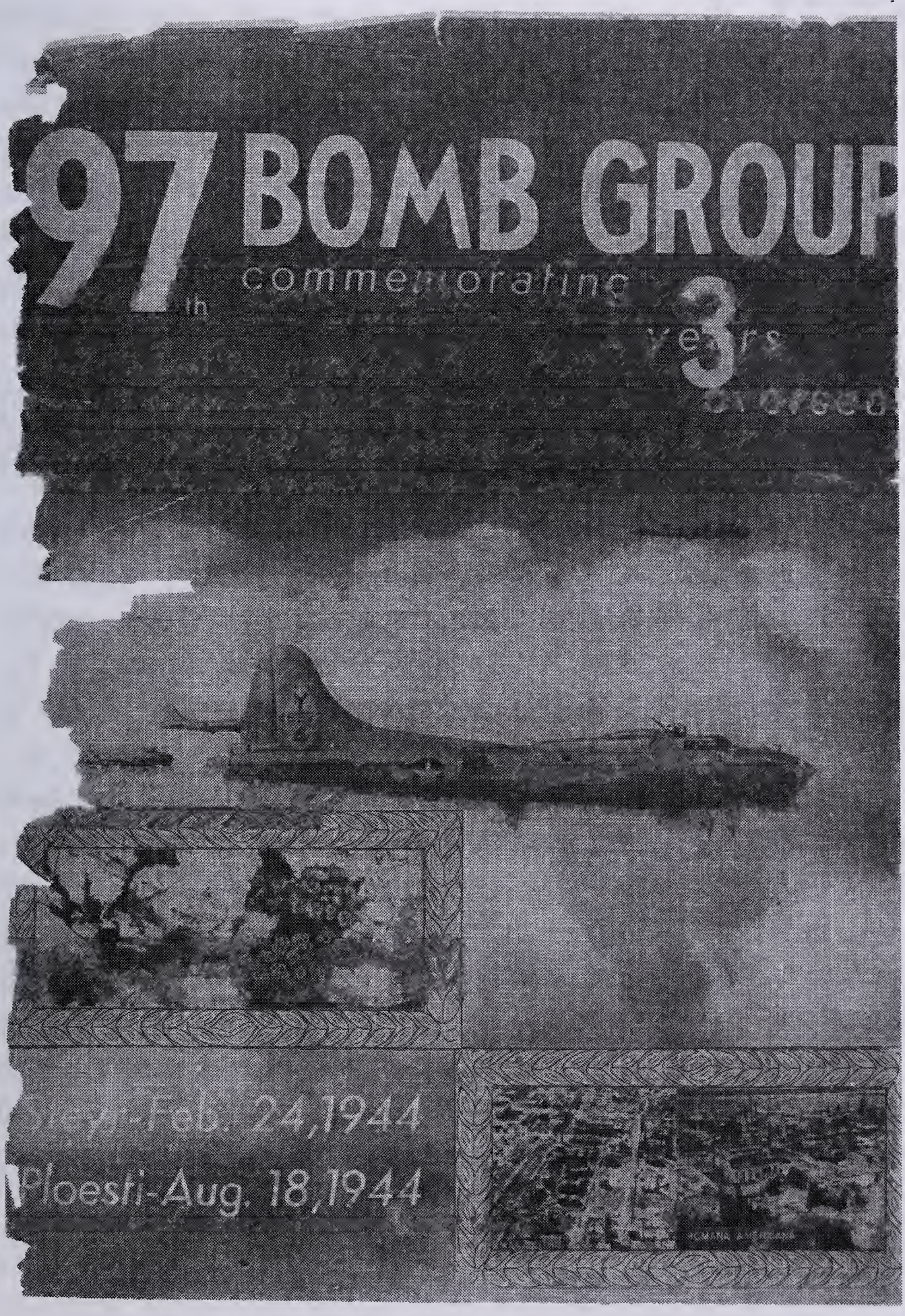
As you know, the Russians have eliminated Silesia from the list of important areas for the 8th + 15th Air Forces! Just now, the main targets are around the Vienna oil area, where the refineries are not as crippled as in other parts of the Reich! (1/30/45)

Though weather grounded George for most of January, things were to change immediately when that long month of garrison duty was over. On the first day of February, he was headed for Austria.

USAAF patch

Lt. Neilson at "tent city" where fliers lived in the Fifteenth AAF, Foggia, Italy.

Sgt. Carl Jones with practice bomb, Foggia.



97th Bomb Group Magazine Cover

Chapter 18

Combat Missions, February 1945

Amendola Air Base
Foggia, Italy

Yalta: Planning the Endgame

Near the end of January, at a top-secret conference at the Black Sea port of Yalta in the Soviet Union, Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin completed plans for World War II's end game and the postwar division of Europe.[1] One conclusion at Yalta was a reaffirmation that the Allies would demand nothing short of the unconditional surrender of Germany and Japan. Some post-war critics have alleged that this position prolonged the war, as there was no incentive for the Axis belligerents to surrender before total defeat. But a negotiated peace would have left elements of the Axis governments in power. The Allies knew that full occupation was necessary to thoroughly purge Germany and Japan of Nazism and militarism, respectively.

At this point, Germany's defeat was inevitable. Stalin had an agenda of his own, wanting to strengthen the Soviet Union as well as gain hegemony in Eastern Europe. They decided on the division of Germany into four occupation zones and the denazification of the country. The Soviets gained their wish that the states in Eastern Europe would be "friendly" to them and that they would have a role in Poland's new government.[2]

Terror Bombing, Jet Fighters, and POWs

While the strategic bombing of oil and transportation installations continued unabated, there was a change in overall air strategy. One reason that British city bombing was less effective than

strategic bombing was that the Nazi elite in Berlin was far less concerned for the welfare of its people than it was for military operations. It was a regime, after all, that placed little value on human life other than as it served the aspirations of National Socialism. By February, the American high command, anxious to bring about the surrender of Germany, moved significantly away from its staunch reluctance to bomb civilian areas. Even though Berlin had been attacked some 350 times by February 1945, significant targets remained, and they were located in the midst of large masses of people, including refugees from the east thronging the rail stations.

On February 3, the Eighth Air Force launched an all-out assault on the city center of Berlin, or "Big B" as it was called by the bomber boys. Miller[3] wrote:

> More than 900 Fortresses and over half as many escort fighters were dispatched to the target, the largest force ever sent to a single city. The Berlin-bound air train was 300 miles long; by the time the forward elements nosed into Germany there were still bombers over the North Sea.

Maj. Robert "Rosie" Rosenthal flew in the copilot's chair of the lead plane. Smoke arose over 7,000 feet from the burning city. His plane was hit by exploding flak on the bomb run. He made it far as the Oder River on the return trip. Then he was hit a second time and ordered the crew to abandon ship just as they crossed over the Red Army lines.

> Robert Rosenthal would forever remember the sight he saw only minutes after he landed behind Russian lines. As two Red Army soldiers led him to a jeep, he looked back instinctively in the direction of Berlin: out on the horizon was a solid curtain of lurid crimson and black. It looked like the end of the world.[4]

The inferno consumed much of the city center where thousands of terrorized citizens ran for their lives in great human rivers. Thousands were killed or homeless. The fires burned for days, and when dawn came, the day was hardly noticed, so dark remained the city. Clouds of poisonous yellow smoke hung over the place like a post-apocalyptic curse.

> For several days after the raid, earth-shaking explosions from delayed action time bombs could be heard throughout the city. Water, gas, telephone service, and electricity were knocked out. Unexploded bombs and vast puddles of filthy water from burst mains made the streets impassible; and clouds of smoke hung for days over the stricken city.[5]

The most infamous raid involving US planes was the incendiary bombing of the southeast German city of Dresden on the night of February 13–14. In a combined Anglo-American attack, the exploding bombs created a firestorm that left scores of thousands dead of asphyxiation and leveled to ashes the beautiful city known as the Florence on the Elbe. The city was virtually undefended. There, the perfect conditions for a firestorm evolved into an incarnation of Dante's *Inferno*, a portrayal of hell. Flames reached thousands of feet in the air, fed by super-heated hurricane-like winds, sucking the oxygen out of the urban canyons of crowded residential neighborhoods, leaving their helpless victims dead, their bodies unscathed by flames. As Miller[6] noted, "To create a hurricane-like firestorm, everything had to go horrifyingly right. It did at Dresden."

The next day, on February 15, the Eighth US Air Force hit the city again by day. The fires burned for weeks. Afterward, piles of bodies were burned in the city streets. It was colossal devastation. Recent research suggests that the numbers of the dead were in the range of 35,000–40,000, but in the chaos of the conflagration, it is impossible to ever know the exact figure.[7]

As well were the great German cities of Munich, Cologne, Hannover, Frankfurt, Stuttgart, Dortmund, and most other cities of significant population reduced to rubble under the rain of Allied bombs in the final months of the war. Indeed, this campaign of terror evoked the indignation of the German civilian population, whose ire was aimed as much at their once beloved fuehrer as at the Allied Luftgangsters (air gangsters) who reigned terror on their cities.[8]

Was it necessary? In the cold calculations of those who ordered the air armadas forward, it was an equation of a lot of devastation and death now to end the war, or war without end. The fact was that the Nazi leader was a crazed lunatic who would never agree to surrender, preferring the total annihilation of Germany to that sensible option.

Many of those in the Nazi inner circle wanted a way out but were so fearful of Hitler that they were paralyzed as to action. A failed assassination attempt the previous summer resulted in the conspirators being shot by the SS and a protracted witch hunt for disloyal elements. The plot, led by Oberst (Colonel) Claus von Stauffenberg, was consummated at Hitler's field headquarters at Rastenberg, East Prussia. To Hitler and his loyalists, the Nazi fuehrer's survival of the explosion that detonated just a few feet from him reinforced the myth of his invincibility. The men surrounding the dictator and the German General Staff knew from the reprisals following July 20, 1944 that as long as Hitler lived, there would be no surrender.[9]

For decades after the war, there were those in America who criticized the bombing of Dresden and the atomic bombing of Japan as atrocities. Yet before making these judgments, it would be well for such critics to place themselves in that time when the "knock at the door" announcing a soldier's death was an all-too common scene on the home front, and there was scarcely a household that was untouched by the tragedy of war. Had there been a cleaner or more humane way to rid the earth of the scourge of Nazism, it likely would have been attempted.

By 1945, fighter activity was concentrated near prime targets such as oil installations, armaments factories, and the capital. However, the Me262 (jet aircraft) project was a bona fide worry for the combined air forces in the final months of the war. The 262's twin turbo engines gave it a speed advantage of 100 mph over the fastest planes in the Allied arsenals. Although technical and bureaucratic problems hampered the revolutionary program, the jet went operational in the summer of 1944. Fifteenth AF fliers spotted jets and their signature contrails throughout the fall of 1944 and the following year. Armed with four 30 mm cannon and two-dozen rockets each, the 262 could take out any heavy bomber in use. However, of the 1,400 turbos built, only as many as fifty were in operation at once. Many had been diverted as fast bombers. Still, it was a genuine threat to Allied bomber formations.

The American Air Force's strategy was to smash the jets on the ground before they became airborne. Between late February and March, ninety were thus taken out at Messerschmitt plants at Leipheim and Obertraubling in Bavaria. Jets engaged Fifteenth bomber fleets on twenty-one occasions in March, downing seven Forts in one encounter. Despite the fact that most Luftwaffe officers knew that the war was lost, their sense of the fighting being an individual contest kept them in the struggle.[10] In the words of Luftwaffe First Lieutenant Herbert Schluetter:

> This was an extremely difficult time for us. The daily strain was hard to take. We were on the defensive and were "the hunted." For this reason I was happy to be transferred. Finally, I would have the chance to fly a superior aircraft and show the *"Amis" how we could do it better.[11]

*German slang term for Americans.

In January, the Soviet Army, with over two million troops and ten thousand tanks, was posed on the Vistula River in Poland, ready to push off an offensive front that stretched from the Baltic

to the Balkans. They would move toward the Oder River, which formed the Polish-German border, seizing the resource-rich province of Silesia and taking Breslau, its principal city. This would relieve some pressure in the west where US troops were still mopping up after the Ardennes campaign and preparing to move eastward to the Rhine.

In the path of the Russian horde were 95,000 American prisoners of war, including 30,000 airmen. In this region was the Stalag Luft IV, a prison camp complex for Allied fliers near Sagen. Stalag Luft IV, one of six such camps specifically for airmen, was the site of the famous Great Escape on March 24, 1944, when eighty-seven POW airmen, using a thirty-meter deep tunnel, made it to the surrounding woods outside the camp. Unfortunately, they were caught shortly after escaping, and fifty were shot by the Gestapo in the ensuing process.[12]

The prisoners of Stalag Luft IV were moved more than once, forced to march in sub-zero weather and rain. Along the road they were bayonetted if they fell, and many perished on these arduous marches. They had marched for approximately eighty-six days over an estimated six hundred miles. Sadly, approximately 1,200 American airmen succumbed to exhaustion, starvation, and disease on the trek.[13]

Most POWs eventually were found by the conquering Allied armies and eventually repatriated to their units after the surrender. The stories of depravity, courage, endurance, and leadership displayed by the men who became prisoners of war in Germany are nearly endless.

George's 1991 account of the February 1 mission to Graz was included with his summary of the mission to Brod, Yugoslavia, flown on January 19 (see chapter 17).

So, we rolled onto the bomb-run and flew and flew, but no bombs fell

I flew, for a change, today! We started out for one of the largest remaining oil targets, which is in the Vienna area; but, by the time we

got over the Alps, the solid blanket of clouds was building up to above any altitude which we might have reached. At that time, the weather reconnaissance plane contacted the wing + group leaders; so, they turned off and hit one of the railroad marshaling yards in the supply line of the Germans between Vienna + Northern Italy! It was at the city of Graz (Gratz), in Austria!

It was uneventful until we got over the target area where the clouds were a solid blanket at 26,000 ft. (2,000 feet below us). Obviously, it was to be a "Miki" (pronounced Mickey) run, wherein the radar man in the radio room of the group lead ship would be the one to set the pattern of bombs on the target, for the entire group! So, we rolled onto the bomb-run + flew + flew, but no bombs fell, nor did anybody open his bomb doors!

We saw wave after wave of boxcars on their way up to some other target

Come to find out, that highly secret + expensive bit of radar equipment had failed in the group lead ship, so that he was unable to pick up the target. As a result, it became necessary to make a 360o over the target + come back over it. Meanwhile, the deputy group lead ship exchanged positions with the lead ship + his "miki" man took over! Then, we made another run over the target + dropped the bombs! Whether we hit it or not remains to be seen! Only pictures taken by radar cameras + reconnaissance later on, will tell the entire story!

On the way back, we saw wave after wave of boxcars on their way up to some other target. Of course, boxcars were escorted by flocks of fighters; they usually need escort. Evidently, the Air Force sent everything that had a wing on it up to the Vienna area, today! It seems that the only logical, remaining targets are now in that sector.

Tonight, I feel more alert, more relaxed, + mentally at ease than I have felt for a long, long time (since I went to Capri!). Believe me, the days of inactivity + waiting to fly has [taken] quite a toll on all of us. I would just as soon fly every day as sit around in the hope or expectation of flying!

So, tonight, the Russians are reported to be only 45 miles from the Wilhelmstrasse in Berlin. How about that? The next question is, How soon after Berlin falls does Germany fall? It looks to me, the old pessimist, that

Hitler's hordes are finally on the skids! Oh well, more about it in tomorrow's chapter. So, for this evening, goodnight, with love, from George. (2/1/45)

(See Appendix I-10)

I was scheduled to fly this morning, but they did not even wake us up for the mission! Instead, we flew a practice formation mission from 10:00 'til 1:15.

As a second part of this practice mission, we made a "dry run" on Foggia. That is to say, we made two bombing runs on the city of Foggia, minus the bombs, of course. The purpose of the affair was merely to practice the bombing patterns that the group tries to make on a target!

By the way, here's another thing about combat flying! It only takes about 6 minutes to land 7 B-17s from 1500 feet above the same runway. That's another type of precision flying that airline pilots don't run into.

Well, this evening, we celebrate a new addition to our luxuries in our abode, or whatever you may call it! For, tonight, thanks chiefly to the efforts of Kendall Foster, we have hot + cold running water in our tent! Foster has been gathering the parts from the flight line, the maintenance shops + God knows where, for quite some time! Every day, he has been having some new gadget welded together; so, tonight, it was all ready + waiting for the water truck to come around 8:00. That was the grand + glorious occasion! (2/2/45)

The hot and cold water apparatus featured a five-gallon gasoline can for a boiler, a G.I. helmet for a wash stand, and a bomb stand which supported the helmet. A detailed drawing of the jury-rigged system was included in this letter.

I got a V-mail from Bob, dated Jan. 25, today! Evidently he's in Italy but he doesn't say where! (2/2/45)

Not even the swallows could take off

Once again, we got all dressed + got into our airplanes + once again the two red flares went from the tower + back we went to the squadron.

I don't know why they even had us go to briefing, this morning, for the weather was right on the ground + not even the *swallows could take off! I wish that I had a sortie for every time I've been to briefing. I'd be well along, then!

When I returned to the tent, I found 3 letters, one from Junior, one from Kay, + one nice one from Barbara! Junior's was the first long one he's written in quite some time! You'll recall how complacent + satisfied he's been since he was made a major! He said he'd never be bucking again. Well, today, he says that there is a chance that he'll make Lt. Colonel in the distant future if his job remains the same. In other words, he is once again breaking into [a] long period of steadily increasing anxiety concerning his next rank!

Just in case you try to follow the newspapers + radio as to when I might have gone on a mission, you should keep in mind that there [are] all these different air forces which operate in this theatre:

1. 15th Air Force
2. **Tactical Air Force (T.A.F.)
3. Balkan Air Force (British)
4. Coastal Air Force (Br.-Am.)

When we go out, you always hear it referred to as "Heavy bombers of the 15th A.F." There is nothing but heavies in the 15th, except fighter escort planes.! (2/4/45)

*The innocent irony of this expression was that "swallow" was the name the Germans gave to the Me262 Turbojet.

**12th Air Force

MISSION #11 – RETURN TRIP TO REGENSBURG [GERMANY] – FEBRUARY 5

On Feb. 5, 1945, freshly back from Rest Camp, we were assigned, again, to go to Regensburg. This target was about as far west in Germany that we went. It had the Elbe River flowing through it, carrying a lot of barge traffic into Austria and Southern Germany. It also had major oil storage and distribution facilities,

which became our target on this occasion. This time, after the 4-hour flight from Foggia, it was a hazy day; and, the mission leaders made a number of turns, in the flight-path again to deter the aiming of anti-aircraft guns and to possibly confuse the German fighter planes to head in a different direction from our formation as it headed for the target. This time, it was, again, a maximum effort, over 200, of which 25% were B-17s. Our group flew at 28,000 ft., relatively high, on the average, as each group went over the target at different altitudes.

One of the vitals of this flight was that we had a 3-minute bomb-run where it was necessary to fly straight and level, with absolutely no change of course, or up or down. During this run, we dumped more than the usual amount of chaff (sometimes called "window"), from the back of the plane. Chaff is strips of aluminum, exactly like Christmas tree tinsel. It was dumped out of bundles, [at] rhythmic intervals for the purpose of creating confusing and false images in the radar screens of the ground-based anti-aircraft gunners. It creates false images of location and altitude and was regarded as very effective. When your plane was not hit, or intercepted by any form of enemy action, you tended to regard these deterring measures as successful.

Our group suffered no damage; but, as typical of many missions, we learned that B-24 Bombers, flying at lower altitudes, did suffer some loses, both by anti-aircraft fire and also from the German fighter planes: Messerschmitt #109 and Focke Wulf #190. Our return to base was uneventful. (G.H.N., 1991)[14]

Wave after wave of bombers seemed to be poised ready to dash into Germany

I got off the ground again, today. They put the "slug" in Adolf in grand fashion, today! I never saw so many planes in one place before, as I saw pass over the coast of Italy, + out over the Adriatic. In one spot, I counted 250 planes!

Then, when we reached the key point, over the Alps, wave after wave of bombers seemed to be poised, as if on a race track, ready to dash into

Germany. Not all of the planes went to the same place, today, but groups, including the 97th, went to Regensburg! Regensburg is currently where the Krauts are known to store what little fuel + oil they have at their disposal for their Luftwaffe! The last time we went to Regensburg, we hit the industrial area; but, today the target was the oil storage, northeast of town!

The target was obscured by a heavy undercast; however, Miki says that we hit it. Our own Col. Shafer was leading the group, today; and, we were in No. 4 position, right behind him; so, we had an easy time, following the plane who flew on automatic pilot!

I imagine there was a big air raid alarm in Munich

After coming off the target + getting started on the long, gentle descent towards home, we passed one of the few open spots in the clouds. Then, lo + behold, what should be in the big hole but the city of Munich. We passed by it, not over it; but, we could see it plainly. Old "Muenchen" (its German name) is pretty well leveled by bombs now; so, they don't bomb it anymore. However, I imagine there was a big air raid alarm in Munich, as we passed by on our journey homeward, with empty bomb racks. So, we probably killed a couple of birds at once, this morning! We bombed Regensburg + created a scare in Munich.

The mission as a whole was uneventful, except that a P-51 came diving through our formation right over Austria. Any plane that heads towards a bomber formation is eligible to be shot at + it's a wonder that he didn't get shot down. You see, it's hard to tell a P-51 from a Me-109, at a head-on view; and, he came barreling right through the entire formation like a "cat out of gear."

Once again, the skies were filled with planes from the 15th Air Force; and, there's no telling how many planes come out from England! (2/5/45)

(See Appendix I-11)

As part of the new "eager" movement whereby everyone must be active + do something on days when they don't fly (the boys call it a

"work-or-fight" movement), I played basketball for a goodly share of the morning! (2/6/45)

While in town, George met a navigator from his squadron named Scorcio who spoke Italian very well. He had been spending time with an Italian girl named Roisette, a college student who had been at college in Florence when the war came. She was with Scorcio at the Red Cross when George was there to grab a bite after a movie.

She is 23, very pretty + very intelligent! One of the topics of the conversation was that she couldn't get over the splendor of the German army's discipline. The Italians are bewildered at the difference between us + the Germans. She wondered how we manage to win the war! Oh, well, every time you talk to an Eyetie, you learn something new. The latest thing I learned is that the Italians who have any decency at all will not allow their girls to run around with any soldiers. The girls who work at the Red Cross are convoyed to + from work by brothers or fathers! In other words, Italian people are very protective about their young women, despite all adverse war comments! (2/6/45)

The following is from a letter to brother Bob, somewhere in northern Italy:

Here's my set-up. They have a "juke" ship which goes over to Naples every Monday, and it wouldn't be too difficult for me to arrange to get on it, if I am not on the mission schedule! That's only a thought, for of course I have no idea where you are in relation to Naples. If a definite rendezvous could be arranged, maybe I could ask the operations officer to let me go for a couple of days, although it isn't customary. Even though we've only had 3 missions during the past 16 days, they won't let you wander too far away! Yes, you're going to like this Eyetie weather! (2/7/45)

We are all watching intently the great Russian drive

Well, we are all watching intently the great Russian drive, because this may be "it." Surely, they are not far from the Blechhammer complex of oil

refineries, in Silesia. When they get there, the war will be pretty well "in the bag." (2/8/45a)

I received the *Boston Herald so you can tell Mary that it comes regularly!

Since you've been looking for optimistic words about the war, Col. Shafer, our squadron CO, is now taking bets that it will be over in Europe in **90 days. That is just one man's opinion, of course, but at least this will probably be the main push we have been looking for! You see, Ma, I'm just as anxious for the war to end as you. It is only that I never look at false optimisms. Well, enough forecasting for ***"cette soiree'."

P.S. ODE to A.T.C. "Take down the service flag, mother, your son is in the A.T.C." (2/8/45a)

*a leading daily morning newspaper

**Shafer's prediction was only off by two days.

***French: this evening

I also got a letter from George Richey, of all people, who writes from a hospital in Belgium, where he has been suffering with bronchitis. He has been in the work connected with repulsing *Von Runstedt's offensive into Belgium! He went into long and moving details, concerning his events leading up to the matrimony which he encountered. He writes as if he experimented with dates with other girls + found that Honey was the one, the only one who he wanted; so, he effected a reconciliation; and, when he was married + spent a few days with her at Ft. Meade, he claimed he never knew what happiness could be until that time!

This morning, I was scheduled on the space ship for the formation; but, even the space ship, needed as it was, could not pass our pre-flight check + the formation went to the target without its desired complement of airplanes! So, this afternoon, I went to "Da Fogge" + saw a picture I saw 6 months previously, at the Flagella Theatre! (2/8/45b)

*German commanding general during the Ardennes campaign (Battle of the Bulge)

The next letter describes the more unseemly side of army life. Prostitution was a booming business wherever G.I.s were

gathered and it was not limited to enlisted men. It was certainly so in London and around the airfields in East Anglia as well as Foggia.[15]

Officers usually pay from $30. to $50. for an evening with the typical [censored] girl

This afternoon, I made a pilgrimage into [censored] to see the stage show [censored] U.S.O. Camp Shows was presenting at the Flagella! This time, we rode on the back end of a dump truck which belonged to a unit of the South African Air Force, which evidently is in this area! The show consisted of D'artega + his all-girl orchestra

Of course, there is the usual aftermath of an afternoon in [censored] when we wait on the corner + hitch our ride back to the 97th. In the meantime we get a chance to see the filthy panorama of [censored] man on the street in [censored]! It is like standing on the corner of Tremont + Boylston + observing the hubbub. The only thing is that the sight is very distasteful + even disheartening. On the corner, one can never fail to see at least one funeral procession, if he only stands for 15 minutes! It seems that everyone gets a procession, and most of the broken down Hearses contain the tiny coffin of one of [censored] children, one of the many who never have a chance! They have a steady line of funerals to bury the dead of [censored].

Then, while watching the crowd go by, if you see anyone that is half-way decently robed, it is usually some man wearing a uniform of the Italian Army, (because that is all the clothes he has) + giving you the contemptible glare of the Fascisti. If you see a spruced-up woman, it is probably some signorina who has capitalized on what sex appeal she has to make herself available for the boys in the U.S. Army. For, every smart girl is "in business." Why, officers usually pay from $30. To $50. for an evening with the typical [censored] girl. Most of them, strangely enough, are married men. If the good, pure American friends + relatives of these same men could only realize what they are willing to pay to these oily wretches, and what kind of entertainment goes on, then, there'd be plenty of ohs! and [censored] back home! I suppose it is part of the game. *C'est la guerre, as they say. (2/9/45)

*French: *That's war*

It appears that the word "Foggia" was censored in each case; the last two cases seem to have resulted from words on the front of the page being censored as the words were razor-cut from the paper.

They sit by the hour and smoke cigarettes and get harder and harder to live with

Well, the red flare put an end to the proceedings before we ever got into the airplanes, this morning. Consequently I got "credit" for another briefing! about all you get for your night of nervous sleep + the tension of it all is a loud "hee-haw" from the rest of the squadron, when you return. Certainly there is nothing more burdening on a person's mind than sweating out these missions that never take off, with not a blessed thing to do in the meantime! It has reached the point where very few of us get a full night's sleep; we are getting over-tired mentally, while our physical parts are being sorely neglected! Fellows get to the point where they sit by the hour + smoke cigarettes + get themselves harder + harder to live with! Something must be done, I know. The only good solution I can think of is to have some sort of a physical program, while it still can be voluntary!

Anyhow Kiefer + I "made the team," as they say, for we were on the training schedule, much to our dislike this time. The humorous incident of our flight came when we joined up in a formation of 4 planes + came in to land. The lead plane called for landing instructions before we got near the field. Then, apparently, we flew over the field, where the lead ship signaled us to peel out of formation. So. Everybody banked around, put their wheels down + headed for the ground. The only trouble was that we were at the wrong field! Nobody discovered it until the unfamiliar runway was spotted! Actually, we were over the field which belongs to the 99th Bomb Group, located several miles from the main road, between the 97th + Foggia! Very embarrassing, indeed, it was to have to pull up + go over to our own field! Thus, we racked up another "U.S.O." mission or a "Juking" mission.

They are scheduling more + more training flights in these overseas units now, with the object in mind of keeping the men busy, when weather halts operational activity! There is a very definite trend towards a training command atmosphere as the war in Europe comes to a close, + the activity becomes less violent. All efforts are going to be taken to keep men in condition + still on their work! (2/10/45)

During 1942 and 1943, when the Eighth was sustaining losses approaching twenty percent on a single mission, there was a tacit agreement among the men that officers would not enter the quonsets where the fliers lived. In exchange for sending so many men to their deaths, some military protocols were suspended.[16]

This tent is fast becoming famous for its cinnamon toast

Just at the moment, I am really in no proper frame of mind for beginning a letter! You see, I have just burned my hand (minor burns) in 3 places, while trying to make certain that the toast on the stove gets properly browned so that the resultant cinnamon toast will be delicious + luscious! Of course, the rest of the fellows are absorbed in a game of pinochle, which game I have no conception of yet; therefore, my agonies + discomforts are no concern of theirs so long as I keep preparing the toast, butter, sugar, cinnamon, etc.! My, oh my! What a novelty this toast eating has become since the cinnamon arrived!! What a brainstorm the cinnamon has turned out to be. Nobody else seems to have thought to send for such an item, and this tent is fast becoming famous for its cinnamon toast! Of late, it has been necessary to sneak + steal the bread from the dining hall, in order to have some on hand, for when the spirit moves one of us!

But now, Scotty Campbell, a navigator from Springfield, is willing to let us in some cocoa, if I'll treat him to some cinnamon toast! Cocoa is another new + A-1 priority item which is still a novel commodity. You see, I happen to hold the critical item, the cinnamon, just like the cigarette dealer who has the cigarettes, back home! So I am in a position to dictate the terms! I let others scare up the bread, the butter + the sugar. Then, I reach into my "ration tin" + pull out that little S.S. Pierce package of cinnamon! It seems like a piece or two of cinnamon toast is as great a

delicacy to us, here, as a well prepared lobster dinner at the Parker House would be to you! No meal that they ever give us, here, has anything that even barely resembles the savor, or the flavor as cinnamon toast! (2/11/45)

Lt. Neilson must have planned to continue the envied cinnamon business as he requested more from home in the same letter as priority number one along with other items to improve the paltry diet the airmen were subjected to at the base.

I guess no one will deny the fierceness + intensity of this year's New England winter. It even has been front page news on the "Stars and Stripes." As long as it is better for you, Ma, I hope the cold weather continues 'til June!

Ma, you can bet that as far as the intensity of the war in Europe is concerned, the duties of the 15th Air Force in Italy has had it easier than anybody. We've been more or less sweating the war out on the ground, while the foot soldiers mold the ring around Germany. So, you needn't feel sorry for the constant pressure that is on us. It is not exactly so. Rather have pity on those who spend their time in the fox holes day after day! For, when the weather is bad, the Air Force doesn't even get into the war!

However, the intelligence summary, tonight, disclosed that the Air Force raid on the only remaining major oil refinery in the theatre, Moosbierbaum on Jan. 31, was highly successful. As a consequence, there is at present no oil refineries of any significance which the 15th has to attack! All of them are either destroyed or badly damaged or captured by the Russians. So-o-o! It looks like the Krauts have just about "had it," as they say in combat when things are going tough. The air forces have got it so they just about can watch the trickle of fuel which the Germans have available for their armies. They've got beaucoup equipment but no gas. That is almost entirely what they're counting on to win the war. Well, we'll see! (2/12/45)

George's perception about Moosbierbaum differs from Mahoney[17] who wrote,

> Damage to the refinery from this [Feb. 1] mission and that of the previous day was limited; two acid

and fertilizer plants damaged and a storage tank destroyed, as many bombs hit open ground during both raids.

Despite the difference in the two accounts, Neilson's understanding of the overall Reich oil situation was consistent with Mahoney[18] who stated that the major German refineries were destroyed to the point that further missions to those targets were unnecessary, and that oil production in the Reich was down to twenty percent of what it had been in April, 1944. There were still some refineries in Austria and Italy that were viable, nonetheless.

Although most of George's perceptions were not far off, Fifteenth losses in aircraft were twice as many in February (one hundred heavy bombers and forty fighters) as in the previous month. The Me262 jet fighters did not reach their potential due to problems the Germans had with the program, not the least of which was a lack of fuel and qualified fliers. Heavy flak persisted at key targets until near the very end.[19] What George seemed to be trying to accomplish here was to reassure Ma that he would be okay, even though he knew he could not promise it.

Col. Shafer took the squadron's "juking ship" to pick up a plane load of American girls

Today was one of the clearest days I've seen in the past few months! It was clear as a bell! The "birds" finally got off today, and at this writing they have gone + come from Vienna. They are certainly giving the Vienna area a terrific pounding. All the birds came home, so everything was okay for the 97th.

Around here, we did little more than take advantage of the warm sunshine + air to shut off the stove + air out the "house." This evening, the squadron is having another party; this one is a Valentine's party, and, it will take the form of a dinner-dance, at the Red Cross in "Da Fogge!" They are going to have all the accumulated liquor available for those who want it.

This afternoon, Col. Shafer took the squadron's "juking ship" + went over to Caserta to pick up a plane load of American civilian girls who work at the Allied headquarters there! So, there may be a few skirts to go with the dance, for a change tonight. It ought to be good for at least a few laughs!

Oh, my!! I almost forgot. The brownies came today!!! It would be a sin not to mention that. Yes, and everyone agrees that they are good, after sampling them! They were nice + fresh too!! Thanks a lot. All I could think of was home + your cooking as I bit into them. Every time some of your home cooking comes, a tinge of homesickness runs up + down my spine! (2/13/45a)

Today, the birds stayed on the ground for the 9th consecutive day! This afternoon, 156 of us went into what used to be the University of Foggia, to play basketball in their ice-box-like gymnasium which is supplied with G.I. athletic equipment. Even Col. Shafer was down there playing with us. He's "one of the boys," anyhow.

Well, today, Kiefer got his *silver bar! After 28 months of being a 2nd Lt. in the engineers, a student officer in flight training + then the time since then, he got what he really should have had before he came overseas! I saw him with his bar in his hand + told him to tear those gold things off his collar. So, I put the shiny, new, silver bar on his collar for him! Ma you should see the pictures of Kiefer's wife + 6 months old little girl!

P.S. I got your letter of Jan. 3, telling about receiving Bob's citations, etc. (2/13/45b)

*First lieutenant rank

I got talking to her to find out what would possess these civilian girls to come overseas

Last night, we had a wonderful time, on the 4th floor of the Red Cross building in town, where the dance was held! As I said it would be, it was in the nature of a dinner-dance, with sheets and mattress covers serving as table cloths. There were lots of colonels + majors from our group + other groups there; and there were some Red Cross girls + civilian stenographers from Allied headquarters at Caserta. Who should I happen to sit beside at

the dinner but a girl named Nelson, from Wisconsin. There always seems to be a Nelson somewheres around! This girl was a red-head + I believe that she was brought up on a farm, in the vicinity of Milwaukee!

Anyhow, I got talking to her to find out what would possess these civilian girls to come overseas to work as secretaries + stenographers! She said that they have the time of their lives over here! Back home, there's no boys + everything is dead, in comparison to the round of excitement over here!

Crude demonstrations of civilized living, army style

This afternoon, the 9 girls who came from Caserta for the dance were hanging around the squadron, waiting for the plane to get cleared to take them back. But, the weather was so bad that the Colonel finally arranged to cart them back in command cars, a 3 hr. trip over the cold, muddy roads to Naples + Caserta. While they were at the squadron, everyone had to kind of mark time + "hold tight," while they made use of the outhouse. Then, too, we had to keep away from the open air urinals which are all over the area. You see, girls are very much out of place in the type of set-up we have here. So, if they come out to our squadrons, they must expect to witness crude demonstrations of civilized living, army style! So, there were a lot of laughs, while the ladies were around for 2 or 3 hours! (2/14/45)

MISSION #12 – VIENNA – FEBRUARY 15

One of our more feared targets was the "South Goods Depot," a storage facility. Vienna is the biggest city in South[eastern] Europe and is very spread out, and well-fortified. There was generally lots of barge traffic on the Danube River and a number of rail lines coming into the center of town, as well as a number of storage areas for military supplies. The South Goods Depot was located south of the center of town, but still in the middle of the metropolitan area. To reach the target it was necessary to fly over much of the city, to approach the target. As you can imagine, flying over a major city, during wartime, attracts a lot of attention. This particular flight did, especially from anti-aircraft people.

Once again, it was a maximum effort: 6 groups, nearly 400 airplanes, a combination of Flying Fortresses and Liberators, all at different altitudes, yet all passing over the target during a ½ hour period. There was considerable cloud cover, making it problematical for the bombardiers to find a visual path to the target. So, there was some circling and maneuvering in the target area, thereby departing from the original bomb-run and target approach. Of course, we had a front row seat to the bursting of 88 millimeter shells. During changes in directions, the various group and squadron leaders communicate with each other by radio, to coordinate things.

The weather was bad over the Alps, as was the case during much of the winter period; so, by the time we got to the Vienna area, everyone was nervous and jumpy. There seemed to be heavy clouds of black and grey smoke, as an aftermath of the anti-aircraft shells exploding around us. Once again, we escaped with only a few small holes under the wings, which we learned when the plane was inspected after landing.

I recall that the night after the mission, our squadron commander, Lt. Col. Bob Shafer, really scolding the group lead bombardier, Lt. Smith, because our bombs had missed the South Goods Depot; and instead, the bombs were spread across a large civilian area, not an uncommon experience for a strategic bombing mission. The occasions of missed targets were looked upon as "work-a-day" or, "the way things go, sometimes." Seldom, if ever, did officers get penalized for missing targets.

Coincidentally, Lt. Col. Bob Shafer came from the same home town, Washougal, Washington, as did Katherine [Sill] Neilson, Bob's wife. Kay and Bob met while Bob was on duty at Camp Swift, Bastrop, Texas, as Officer's Club officer. (G.H.N., 1991)[20]

The Air Force has a bag full of tricks with which to befuddle the radar screens

Well, today we went up what has been the "beaten path" ever since the last spell of bad weather broke! *"Wien" You know it better as the setting

for the "Tales from the Vienna Woods"; but, to us it sits on the sectional chart, just north of the Alps on the Danube, as one of the hottest targets in the 15th category! Yes, in the throes of being softened up for a probable siege by the Russians. Day after day, every bomber the 15th has goes over that great center of culture + education, with but one purpose, to grind it into pulp! When they send us after oil refineries, the target is definite + specific. But, when the target is a supply depot or the Vienna main rail station, a bit of a stretch of the imagination tells a fellow that they can't send hundreds of bombers over the center of Vienna without hitting something besides the "South Goods Depot" (today's target) which is in the center of one of the Viennese business districts. Poor old "Wien," it has been pounded + blasted; and, now they are going after it hammer + tong in order to hasten its fall once the Russians approach the gates!

Today, it was not what we call a "rough" trip, because a solid undercast forced the anti-aircraft batteries to shoot by instruments. For that type of bomb-run, the Air Force has a bag full of tricks with which to befuddle the radar screens, all of which means they don't often shoot accurately, when we bomb through the clouds!

The weather was clear + the visibility was perfect all the way to the target; but, as soon as we crossed the Alps which lie this side of Vienna, there was an undercast of low clouds! So, we didn't see the city, as has been the usual case! (2/15/45)
*German: Vienna

On this mission, one Fort of the 463rd BG was destroyed by bombs from another plane.[21] So called friendly fire loses are tragic, but they did happen in the chaotic vortex of war.

(See Appendix I-12)

MISSION #13 – BOLZANO, ITALY – FEBRUARY 16

Our primary target, this day, was to bomb an airfield in southern Germany, south of Munich. This was an exercise where various groups were scattered across a wide area, perhaps 10 targets for the purpose of disrupting the ability of the Germans

to provide air and supply support to their troops in northern Italy. In a unique maneuver, the formations broke up at lower altitude (17,000 ft.) and disbursed each squadron after a separate air field. Little resistance was anticipated. It had been carefully briefed that we were to only attack the targets if the actual fields were clearly visible.

However, when we crossed the Alps and headed north through Austria, it was evident that the targets were "socked-in," not visual. So, we re-gathered into our Group formation and headed south for our first alternate target: Bolzano. Bolzano is a rail center in the middle of the mountainous area of the Brenner Pass. As we headed south, it was a clear weather run of 75 miles, directly to Bolzano, from southern Germany. No effort was made to deviate the course or do any form of evasive action. Our Group lead plane just headed us straight for Bolzano and sailed up directly across the target. In effect, it was a 70 mile long bomb run, highly unusual and inadvisable. So, as the expression goes, "They saw us coming."

Many of the antiaircraft guns were mounted on the side of the very high 10,000-12,000 ft. mountains. The guns let us have "the works," with some of the shots coming up sideways, from the sides of the mountains. A number of planes, including ours, got hit just as we dropped the bombs onto the rail yards. The plane on our right wing just flipped up in front of us, then over our heads and downwards, in flames. For a few minutes, it was terrifying. We did a steep, diving turn off the target, in order to get away from the bead the gunners had us on. It was frightening and scary. The question became, "Why did we not do any evasive action, and, instead make a 75 mile bomb run" making us sitting ducks for anti-aircraft gunners, especially those polishing their accuracy factors? When flying bombers, where you cannot see what actually is happening except when you get hit, this occasion appeared to be the one where my crew came the closest to being shot out of the sky.

After the frenzy over the target, it was decidedly a nice, emotional let-down to coast back over the Alps, past Venice and to the safety of southern Italy. The ground-crew, always hard-working

and methodical, had to work all night in order to get our plane back into serviceable shape, since we were scheduled again the next day. (G.H.N., 1991)[22]

I flew once again, today. Today, as a sort of bit of spice in the situation, we went on two different bomb-runs! In other words, we went over two targets!! The first target was scheduled to be the main training + experimental airdrome at Lechfeld, which is west of Munich! Much of Germany's progress with jet propelled fighters is being accomplished there! However, the intelligence officers told us that we were only to bomb visually! The bombs were not to be dropped "P.F.F." (Miki). As it happened the sky was cloudless all the way up, over the Alps + over Austria. But, when we approached Munich, there appeared low, rolling clouds over the Munich area! Since there was some doubt as to whether the bombardier could sight the target, they made the bomb-run + then, about 2 minutes before the bombs went, they closed the doors + turned off the target!

Then, for a few minutes, several B-17s circled aimlessly over southern Germany, while the "big wheels" in the group lead planes conferred on their own private channel of radio! Then, they decided to hit the 2nd alternate target, as briefed.

When we got there, they were awaiting us; and, it was not much fun

The second alternate was Bolzano which is the main town in the middle of the Brenner Pass, between Innsbruck, Austria, + Verona, Italy! All the rail communication chokes at Bolzano. The weather was so clear that we could see the path of the Brenner Pass, all the way from Munich! We could even see Bolzano itself, which is located in the center of the Alps, 120 miles below Munich (on the Italian side of the Alps.)

The Brenner Pass seems to knife through those bleak peaks, just like a man-made conduit, all the way from Innsbruck through to Verona! Today, we could see our 2nd target, 100 miles away! When we got there, they were awaiting us; and, it was not much fun! However, we got out okay + then, it was the problem of letting down through all the haze + low clouds which predominated en route back to the base! I flew alongside

of the colonel's plane in the group lead squadron, all the way! Since the Group lead plane flies on autopilot, it was a rather smooth ride, coming home that is!

Well, it was an exhausting 7 ½ hour trip, this time. We didn't go too high today, either! (2/16/45)

(See Appendix I-13)

The raid on Bolzano helped choke off the Brenner Pass to enemy movements. The Brenner was the main corridor between Germany and northern Italy. Destruction of the rail yards slowed the retreat of the Reich's retreating troops in one of the last evacuations of Germans from foreign soil in the war.

Fifteenth Attrition

As the war progressed, the rate of losses in planes and men decreased. Until Ploesti was finished off in late summer of 1944, the number of men who finished their missions and those lost in combat was roughly equal. Thereafter, until the armistice, the ratio improved to 1.6. Compared to ground or sea forces, these were still extremely high loss rates.[23] Sometimes planes that landed at base had lost some of their crew to flak, fighter assault, or bailouts. Many pilots and other crewmen stayed with their stricken aircraft, guiding them to a fiery end where the ill-fated plane would not kill innocents on the ground—friendly troops as well as civilians. Medals awarded notwithstanding, no one can know all the heroic acts that occurred in the war. Able men gave their parachutes to crewmen, sacrificing their lives for their friends. Countless such acts of gallantry are known only to God.

MISSION #14 – LINZ, AUSTRIA – FEBRUARY 17

Linz is on the Danube River, 75 miles west of Vienna, better known then, for the location of the Herman Goering Steel Works. Goering was the Production Minister for the Nazi war machine. But, on this

occasion, the target was a Benzol storage tank farm, north of town. The most important aspect of this mission was the bad weather all the way up from Foggia, across the Alps. The briefing had indicated the target area could be clear. The weather, en route, was stormy and there were clouds at several altitude levels, as the Group made its way to the target area. It was a day on which it might have been better to cancel the mission. However, the upper command people seemed to have been under pressure to get us up there.

The crisis of the mission occurred over the Alps, where, with 44 planes in our Group, flying in a "box" formation, consisting mostly of the 14 planes in each squadron, it was almost impossible to see the next plane in the formation, on either wing, not to mention the ones in front (above) and in back (underneath). Of all the 44 planes, for most of the 2 hours, about all you could see was 2 or 3 of the 44 planes. Yet, we were all flying close to each other, in formation, just about an impossible situation, which might have led to instant calamity. I kept swapping control with my co-pilot, sometimes to relieve tension and sometimes to get a "normal relief" after a 30 minute stint at the controls. Finally, it got so thick that I could not see any other plane on any side, when I had the controls. At the same time as we were trying to stay together, we were gradually climbing towards our target altitude.

Somehow, with God's help, a number of the planes got scattered, as they tended to ease away from the center of the formation, including our Group lead plane. This time, our plane was flying as "deputy" to the Group lead. The Group lead went off, leaving the formation, as did a number of others in the formation. 24 of the planes stayed with the formation as we broke out above the clouds, in Austria. Our plane was, by default, now the lead plane of the Group; because, our Group lead plane, as well as 3 other planes, had disappeared, gotten lost from the formation. What had been an entire Group of 44 planes, became 24 as a result of 35 terrifying minutes of flying blindly, though still in formation. Under those conditions, we should not have stayed in formation if there was any way to get out of it. There was not. We were just fortunate that by holding a straight, climbing course, no planes ran into each other.

When the planes remaining in the formation came into the clear, above the clouds, and the situation reconciled itself, we were at the edge of the Austrian slopes of the Alps. From there, our plane automatically assumed the position of Group lead.

The navigator, Floyd Hendershot, who normally never had to function in his navigator capacity, except to monitor the lead plane in the formation, took over the responsibility of leadership and set us on course to establish the proper bomb run on the Linz Benzol plant. The target area was in clear air and well-fortified with anti-aircraft guns. Suddenly, I felt a surge of responsibility that my crew was in a leadership position, with a challenge to do a good job with the target. From the "I.P" (initial point) of the bomb-run, all went well. Our bombardier, Lt. Worth Dunn made a good run; and, we successfully peeled off and headed back to Italy. The intelligence pictures showed that we had hit the target well, even though we had struggled through a nearly impossible situation of weather, with a sense of satisfaction that we had overcome obstacles, very ominous ones, and still got the job done.

That night, the Group Intelligence Officer came to our officer's tent and showed us the photos of the direct hits we had made on the tanks. Three months later, in April, 1945, I was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross "for heroic action under the pressure of difficult conditions," in assuming the leadership of the Group by "taking over" and effectively hitting the target, as planned. (G.H.N., 1991)[24]

I got a look at the Italian fleet, as it lies on the bottom of the harbor of Taranto

Well, yesterday, I flew my 3rd sortie in 3 days, quite an unusual occurrence in this squadron, where we have so many crews to rotate + they only use 6 to 8 crews each day. Well, we went to Linz, Austria, yesterday. Linz is a key rail center between Vienna + northern Italy + central Germany. The target was the railroad yard where a large concentration of freight was thought to be existing! Linz is just about west of Vienna + it is a fairly large Austrian city.

There were clouds all over the continent; so we didn't get to see much of the terrain. On the way back, we had to fly through some thick, murky haze which hung over the Alps. We frequently fly through that sort of cloud formation, at high altitude. They are called cirrus clouds, and they consist mainly of ice crystals! They appear like dense fog appears on the ground! The only good thing about it is that it is not as thick or black as a thunder cloud formation. Anyhow, we flew through all sorts of clouds, on the route back over northern Yugo and Italy. As is the usual case, the weather managed to clear up over the Adriatic so the strain was much less as we passed over the spur into the Foggia area!

Today, I was not on the mission schedule, but Kiefer, Foster + I flew anyways. They had us on a "U.S.O. mission." This afternoon we went, with another bombardier, to the southern part of Italy, in fact we went right to the tip of the heel of Italy, on a practice bombing mission. They have a range similar to the one we had at Gulfport, which lies right next to the Gulf of Taranto. So, I got a look at the Italian fleet, as it lies on the bottom of the harbor of Taranto!

We didn't exactly relish having to fly at 20,000 feet on a practice mission, but it wasn't too bad, for we had the C-1 autopilot in operation and, the bombardier did all the work from his position in the nose. The whole purpose of the mission, anyway, was to give the bombardier some practice in making bomb runs.

The chaplain was complaining about not enough of the ground personnel going to church

As soon as we completed the trip, we came back towards Foggia, letting down at 2000 ft. per min., 250 miles per hour. So, we didn't waste any time getting back to the base. So, after flying 3 days in a row, we had a busman's holiday by flying a U.S.O. mission!

I went to mass + communion at the Group, this morning. The chaplain was complaining about not enough of the ground personnel going to church during the week. He said that plenty of combat men come; but, he doesn't see enough of the ground personnel! (2/18/45)

Ostensibly, the chaplain's point, and George seemed to "get" this, was that there are no atheists in foxholes.

By the way, they are certainly catching up with a lot of Air Corps personnel who are attached to headquarters units! What rackets those fellows had. Now, they're getting a lot of them for infantry duty! You see, the air bases are well behind the lines as it is; but, these fellows in headquarters outfits are in big towns! For example, the headquarters for Italy-based planes are in Bari, Naples, etc. Anyhow, they are actually "drafting" men from Air Corps personnel. Enlisted men who are on combat status are allowed to "volunteer," if they so desire. Of course, not too many have volunteered, so far!

Well, 4 days of hi-altitude flying keeps a fellow fairly well tired out; so, I'll go to bed, now + get ready for tomorrow's trip. (2/18/45)

As often affirmed in the historical literature, this mission illustrates the point that the weather was more of an enemy to air crews than the guns trained on the planes.

(See Appendix I-14)

As the February 18 letter made reference to the work of the ground crew, it is fitting that the role of those men should be touched upon.

Ground Crews: Unsung Heroes of the AAF

Behind every aircrew, there was an equally dedicated ground crew. In addition, there were chow crews, intelligence teams, ordnance crews, and ground vehicle drivers. In all, the Fifteenth had 62,000 non-flying personnel. The great achievements of the Fifteenth AF would not have been possible without the devotion of the "wrench benders" on the ground. These men practically lived on the flight line, often catching a little sleep only when the planes were on missions. They frequently worked around the clock. The mechanics took such pride in their birds that they rejoiced when

their ships returned and often cried when they went down, holding themselves responsible. It was customary for the ground crews to meet their planes when they returned from their missions.

Despite the wonders of modern mass-production, the ground crews and fliers alike knew that "few aircraft were identical beneath the paint."[25] There were "hanger queens," planes with chronic problems, and "up birds," such as were four B-17s of the Ninety-Ninth Group, with more than 120 missions each.[26] Tillman[27] wrote,

> Such records were due to the slavish devotion of ground crews. Mechanics and other technical specialists took enormous pride in this work, often approaching the obsessive-compulsive. The opportunity to work on so exotic a machine as a four-engine bomber or a racy fighter seemed too good to be true. For some crews, the flying creatures of steel, aluminum, and rubber could take on the characteristics of a beloved pet. A 450th Group pilot recalled that he "never went out to the flight line at any hour of the day or night that the mechanics were not out there working. These mechanics were the most dedicated people I ever saw."

The ground crews had their own command structure parallel to that of the fliers. Each crew chief led a team of mechanics and technicians who were responsible for three "flights" of three bombers each. They worked very fast, and their achievements were amazing. They could remove and replace a wing or replace an engine in a night's work. There was a massive network of workshops that supported the army of mechanics. Those who toiled over camshafts and head gaskets on the plains of Italy and East Anglia contributed as much to the defeat of the Axis as the men who manned the throttles, the radios, and the bomb bay doors. Their overseas tours were longer than fliers, as they were not limited to the same number of missions.[28]

The startling contrast between the writer's two accounts of the next mission seem completely wanting of explanation other than the fact that forty-six years separated them. The letter corresponding to the milk run to Klagenfurt details anything but such.

MISSION #15 – KLAGENFURT, AUSTRIA – FEBRUARY 19

This mission came two days after the Linz trip. It was to hit a railroad yard marshalling complex, at Kalgenfurt, southern Austria. It was the proverbial "Milk Run." There was no enemy opposition, and it was a short trip: a few anti-aircraft bursts, low and some distance away from our formation. Flight crews get the same credit for all missions, the tough ones and the easy ones. (G.H.N., 1991)[29]

Tonight, I am in a position to tell you about one of the most vivid experiences of the war, and my life!! For, yesterday, I underwent an ordeal that few fellows can say they have endured + still not been in too great a danger. The tale is how we landed on the Yugoslav Island of Vis on the Yugo coast of the Adriatic with only one engine. Yes, Ma, buy more stock in the Boeing Aircraft Company, for certainly no planes have ever been known to accomplish such deeds as the beloved Flying Fortress, which is still the greatest "war bird" we own. You would hardly believe that a big bomber could bring you in + land with only one engine going! But a B-17 has done that occasionally! Here's how it happened!

The oil started to fly out of No. 3 engine and it ran rough and began to shake badly

The group climbed through the overcast, en route to Vienna at 10:00 a.m.! Then, as the weather cleared, we crossed the Yugo Coast, in the teeth of a 120 m.p.h. headwind. So, we pulled terrific manifold pressure on the engines, trying to haul up over the mountains of Yugo + eventually the Alps. We were only making good groundspeed of 80 m.p.h. So, we creeped over the terrain, at a snail's pace. Many planes had to drop bombs in order to

stay in formation! It seemed like we'd never reach the Alps; but, the engines were grinding + winding just the same. We almost felt like stopping then + resting them. Someone estimated that if we continued, we'd get to Vienna about 3:00 in the afternoon, instead of 12:00 noon! Finally, the group lead plane decided to turn off + hit an alternate target, which happened to be the railroad yards near the town of Klagenfurt, in Austria.

By the time we started to pull up to the bomb-run, the oil started to fly out of No. 3 engine + it ran rough + began to shake badly. Oil + smoke kept pouring out of the cowling + then the propeller controls "ran away," so that the propeller over-sped + began to accelerate terribly, to the point where it could have torn off the crankshaft. Pretty soon, we had the prop feathered + then shut off the gas lines + cut the ignition switch!

As we rallied off the target, No. 2 engine "ran away" also!

By this time, we were behind the group which had already started down the bomb-run. So, we had to drop 6 bombs in order to catch up. We never did catch up, + we had to follow the group + drop the bombs when we thought we should have. Fortunately, we saw no flak!

Then, as we rallied off the target, No. 2 engine "ran away" also! The propeller began to turn up 3400 R.P.M. + the engine was putting up 72" of manifold pressure. Smoke + oil poured forth from the cowling. This engine would not feather + it still ran like a windmill, + a windmilling prop is worse than a feathered engine because it retards your progress!

So, there we were, rallying off the target with both our inboard engines out of operation! Of course, we were unable to stay in formation + the group kept growing smaller + smaller, as they drew away from us. I contacted the colonel in the lead plane + told him of our predicament. He said that he'd call the fighter escort for us! So, that was taken care of!

Then, since we were to go home alone, we began on our radio procedure for emergencies! We knew that we couldn't go all the way home; so, we contacted the "air-sea-rescue" station which is located on the coast of Italy, at Ancona! Through the magic medium of the Very High Frequency (V.H.F.) radio, the station was able to give us our position + course to steer to the nearest landing field. The station is in Italy + we were up in Austria, yet all we had to do is put in a distress call + they could detect

our position. With that knowledge, they could track our course all the way to wherever we landed!

Then, we were advised to contact the rescue station operated by the British, on the Isle of Vis, for it was our easiest point to reach. Then, I switched to another frequency + contacted "Fast Yacht," which is the station on Vis. They gave us a bearing on their station, which we were to fly!

The tailwind helped to sweep us down off the continent

All the while, we were holding our altitude, with 2 engines, at 135 m.p.h. (instead of our usual 155 m.p.h.) The converse of the headwind, the tailwind helped to sweep us down off the continent + over the Yugoslav coast! Without the wind, we'd have been in serious danger of being forced to land in Yugo, in one of their primitive emergency fields. But, with a 120 mile per hour tailwind + 20,000 ft. of altitude, it was almost a lead pipe cinch that we could make the Isle of Vis, where the British operate an air-sea-rescue unit + we have an airplane service squadron! I kept calling, "Fast Yacht" on the emergency radio channel + the Britisher who was monitoring the radio would give me a new correction each time I called him. Once, I called him + told him we had 15,000 feet of altitude + he said, "I say, old boy, you're about 40 miles from my station + you should make it easily."

Then, about ½ hour from Vis, No. 1 engine simply faded out of the picture. It didn't blow oil or smoke; it simply quit drawing any power! So, we had No. 1, No. 2, + No. 3 engines out. All we had was No. 4 engine that was giving us any power. We knew that as long as we had altitude, we could glide + not need power! We, in effect, swapped our altitude for airspeed + distance, for we had the next thing to a glider. No. 1 was windmilling, No. 2 was windmilling + hindering our progress. No. 3 was feathered + good old No. 4 was running.

We had only one chance to make it

We knew we could make it, a long time before we got there! But, we also knew that we had only one chance to make it + that we had only one pass to make at the steel-mat runway, for we had to land the first time!

As we approached Vis, we couldn't find the runway (Vis is 8 miles long); and, we had 4,000 feet, so we called the Britisher + asked him to shoot a flare so that we could see the little strip which lies in the valley, in the middle of the island! Finally, we spotted the little runway + then came the crucial moment! We were too high + we had to lose altitude + still be in a position to make a normal landing, a very exact thing to have to plan. So, we made a 360o turn away from the runway + came back in towards the field, in perfect position for a good approach. So, we came in + made a perfect landing!

Ma, I was never so relieved in all my life as when we hit the airstrip on that little Yugoslav island! When we stopped rolling, we had only one engine + we could not taxi, so they have a big crane which they swung around + yanked us off the runway + put us amidst the hundreds of other wrecks + disabled planes; for, all the planes that land in Vis are on emergency landings, en route back from a mission. If you can't make it home, you head for Vis. They have derricks + cranes there, because most planes crash land or are so disabled that they can't taxi themselves!

The B-24s went through to Vienna and most them ran out of gas on the way back

While we were there, 8 B-24s came in. (Vis is full of wrecked B-24s.) However, these B-24s were only out of gas! It seems that the B-24s (booby traps) went through to Vienna + most them ran out of gas on the way back, as a result of having to buck the headwind on the way up. Some B-24s landed in Yugo + some bailed out. Others ditched in the ocean + some jumped into the ocean, while others made Vis. All this, I learned by listening on the emergency rescue radio frequency. Those B-24s have it hard, no matter how you look at it!

Incidentally, the first B-24 I saw on Vis was one which had crash landed, on a previous day! It had big letters on the side, "CONSOLIDATED MESS." The inference was, of course, there is a term "Consolidated mess" used in the army, for feeding men. Then, the other inference is that the Consolidated Aircraft Company makes the Liberators. And, oh Ma! What a "mess" they are!! So, I've yet to see a more appropriate name for an airplane, or rather a boxcar, which is quite different from an airplane!

So, I have an experience that will never die in my mind. It will always be a good after dinner topic! "How we flew 170 miles on one engine"

The next day, we refused 4 rides on B-24s that would take us to Foggia

We spent the night amongst the friendly, clean, polite, but primitive Yugoslav Partisans, who inhabit Vis. Vis is a scenic, quaint, hilly little island, with a beautiful little harbor + inlet, much like Capri. All it serves now, is as an emergency field for our bombers!

The next day (yesterday), we refused 4 rides on B-24s that would take us to Foggia, and, we waited for the regular transport plane which comes up with supplies, daily. So, we rode airline style (same plane as I rode to New York that time) from Vis to Bari. Bari is where the Air Transport Command has its headquarters, you see. From there, the C./O. lost no time in having a special transport bring the crew back to the 97th! So A.T.C. was very nice to us! The old bird we had will probably get new engines on Vis. Then, someone will have to fly it back!

Since yesterday, we've been busy retelling the tale to the fellows, most of whom still can't believe it! Up at group headquarters, the group operations officer said, "What?!! You landed at Vis, with only one engine?" He seemed amazed!

Well, Ma, to tell you the truth, we weren't in really bad danger + never came near having a close call. To begin with, we weren't far up in Austria. So, we had not too far to go. Then, we had that tailwind! It wasn't a case of worrying about making it, as soon as we sized up the situation + contacted the rescue station and got our bearings! We knew very, very early that we could make it! It was only that you can only do that in a B-17, no other plane!

Not knowing the circumstances, everyone here is amazed. But, we were never amazed or scared. We didn't have time to be. (2/20/45)

They served us coffee, in fine Austrian china

By the way, I have 15 sorties, now, or the equivalent of 25 missions, which is all they used to fly in England. And, I am not half finished.

About Vis, I've never met such lovely people as the Yugoslav Partisans, Ma! An enlisted man took the 3 officers to a home, which he calls his home, while on Vis. I've never seen such a clean home. They served us coffee, in fine Austrian china, with all the courtesies of good American hospitality. They never look at you but what they smile and would give their shirts to help you, if they only had things to give! They have their world + their own customs, yet the whole world knows the jobs that the Yugoslav Partisans, with Marshall Tito as their leader, have done. They have these tasks to accomplish:

1. They fight the many pro-Nazi tribes which make Yugo the storm center of the turbulent Balkans! (the Eustazi, Chetniks, etc.)
2. They are great guerilla fighters + they hinder Nazi supply movements.
3. They do a splendid job of aiding escaped American aviators.
4. Given the equipment, they are the Allies' best ally in this European war!!

I got a letter from Bob. He says that he could see me, if I got to Florence. He says he is too tied down to come my way. Evidently, he's close to Florence + wants to see me. Now, then, Florence is in northern Italy + we'd have no way of getting there, with one of our birds. So, we'll have to wait 'til he can get to Rome! (2/21/45)

(Appendix I-15)

George's assertion that was he was not in any danger at all does not jive with the facts that he had so exhaustingly penned following the ordeal of February 19. Yet it seems plausible that he wanted to calm a worried mother, who after reading of her pilot-son's one-engine landing would have every cause to be hysterical with worry. It was not the last that George was to see of the island of Vis, and the next visit would make the landing on February 19, for all its heroics, seem like a routine training exercise.

Bloody, Muddy War: How Bob Neilson Became a Combat Casualty

The following is included as background for the incredible story of how the lives of George and his brother Bob intersected in wartime Italy and to expatiate some the scenes of the ground war. It also illustrates, though in a highly abridged manner, the complexity of ground campaigns and the gallantry of the men who fought under the skies where the Fifteenth Air Force sought to rule the air.

Organized on July 13, 1943, the Tenth Mountain Division was in part inspired by the Finnish ski troops who held off the Soviet incursion into Finland in 1939. The men were trained in Colorado in harsh Alpine terrain, then sent to Louisiana to gain experience in semitropical conditions before being sent overseas.

Allied predictions that the Axis forces would abandon Italy all the way to the Alps after the underbelly campaign in southern Italy proved wrong. After the Italians gave up on September 8, 1943, the Germans and Allies dug in at what was called the Gustav Line from the Allied beachhead an Anzio and stretching between the Tyrrhenian and Adriatic Seas just south of Rome.

The spring offensive launched in May 1944 by the British Eighth and US Fifth armies pushed the Axis 150 miles north to the Arno River by August. Rome was liberated in June. At the Arno, the Germans established the Gothic Line, a series of fortified passes and mountain tops fifteen to thirty miles deep extending from the Ligurian Sea to Pisa. This line included points at Florence, the rail and communications hub at Bolzano, and the Adriatic coast.

The Allies, stripped of many units needed in northwest Europe and other fronts, pressed the campaign in the Apennine Mountains, which formed the north-south “spine” of the Italian peninsula. The objective was to hold down German units and prevent them from being moved to shore up other campaigns. The Allies held. German forces were commanded by Luftwaffe Field Marshall Albert Kesselring. The Allied strength, in addition

to the Fifth and Eighth (US and British) armies included troops from other nations in the Allied coalition, including Greece, India, New Zealand, France, Poland, Canada, South Africa, and Brazil. Italian partisans also participated on the Allied side. Units from these countries served under American and British command although they had their own field command structures in place.

On September 12, the Allies assaulted the Gothic Line in terrain composed of "numerous mountain peaks, streams, deep valleys, broken bridges, and rugged spurs, all offering excellent defensive positions to the enemy."[30]

> Although significant numbers of troops were involved on both sides, small unit actions predominated and rarely were units larger than a battalion engaged at any one time. The compartmentalized terrain tended to erode the Allies three-to-one advantage in manpower, and whatever successes were gained were due largely to the individual soldiers' valor, resilience, and determination. Encouraged at having breached the Gothic Line in at least one sector, the Americans began a sustained mountain-by-mountain, ridge-by-ridge, and valley-by-valley drive toward Bologna. In response, the enemy tenaciously defended each position in a series of short, intense, small unit actions.[31]

Stiff enemy resistance, torrential rains, washed-out bridges, and mud slowed the advance to a crawl. Three thousand US casualties were suffered in the first week of October 1944. The German command knew how critical the Apennine front was to prevent a breakthrough into the Po Valley, which runs west to east in northern Italy. Occupying the Po would doom Axis forces in Italy.

The weather cleared in mid-October, allowing fighter-bombers and medium and heavy bombers of the Mediterranean Allied

Tactical and Strategic Air Forces, which included the Fifteenth AF and the Twelfth AF in Africa, to support the drive. Over the next several months, fighting went back and forth as tired troops pressed the advance and both sides jockeyed units to reinforce their respective weak spots on both sides, falling back and advancing in push-and-shove fashion.

The Tenth Mountain Division was deployed to Italy in December. In January 1945, following two failed attacks, Operation Encore engaged the Tenth, reinforced by artillery, armor, and antitank weapons. The mission of this crack infantry unit, trained in alpine fighting, was to open access to the Po Valley where the German armies could be routed by the fully rested and resupplied Fifteenth Army Group. Supported by the Brazilian Expeditionary Force, the attack pushed off on February 19.[32]

> The division entered combat on January 28, 1945 in the North Apennine Mountains of Italy. The division faced German positions arrayed along the 5 mile long Monte Belvedere-Monte Della Torracia ridge. Other divisions had attempted to assault Mount Belvedere three times, even holding it temporarily, but none had succeeded. To get to Mount Belvedere the division first had to take a ridge line to the west known to the Americans as Riva Ridge. The Germans on Riva Ridge protected the approaches to Mount Belvedere. The assault on Riva Ridge was the task of the 1st Battalion and F Company, 2nd Battalion, 86th Mountain Infantry. After much scouting, it was decided the assault would be at night, a 1,500 vertical-assent. The Germans considered the ridge to be impossible to scale and manned it with only one battalion of mountain troops. The attack by the 86th on February 18, 1945, was a complete success and an unwelcome surprise for the Germans.

> *Mount Belvedere was assaulted next. Belvedere was heavily manned and protected with minefields. Shortly after the 86th assault on the Riva Ridge, the 85th and 87th Regiments made a bayonet attack without covering artillery fire on Belvedere beginning on February 19th. The surprise of the assault was successful and after a hard fight, the peak was captured. Realizing the importance of the peak, the Germans made seven counterattacks over two days. After the first three days of intense combat, the division lost 850 casualties to include 195 dead. The 10th had captured over 1,000 prisoners. The 10th was now in a position to breach the German's Apennine Mountain line, take Highway 65 and open the way to the Po Valley.[33]

*Note: location where Cpt. Robert P. Neilson was wounded on February 21, 1945.

While he was with the Fifth Army in the Italian Campaign, wrote Ernie Pyle in tribute to the infantrymen with whom the renowned Scripps-Howard war correspondent felt such a brotherhood,

> They live and die so miserably and they do it with such determined acceptance that your admiration for them blinds you to the rest of the war.... To any individual the war is seldom any bigger than the space of a few hundred yards on either side of him.[34]

By March 5, the Tenth Mountain Division occupied a solid line of ridges and mountain crests that placed Allied forces in excellent positions for further offensive operations in the spring. The Tenth Mountain Division was the first unit to reach the Po River.[35]

MISSION #16 – MEMMINGEN, SOUTHERN GERMANY – FEBRUARY 22

On Feb. 22, we went to the same target that had been assigned on the day that bad weather and cloud cover had hidden the airfields in southern Germany. This time, the weather was good. Our group broke up into squadron-only "boxes" as soon as we crossed the Danube River.

Our assignment was to drop fragmentation bombs onto the airfields. This was the first time that we carried fragmentation bombs. These bombs were dropped in clusters. When they hit the ground, they exploded in a horizontal trajectory, for the purpose of destroying airplanes, equipment, and personnel if they were in the path. They just made a mess of everything, as opposed to the heavy, penetrating devastation done by the 500 or 250 lb. bombs which we usually carried. These fragmentation bombs were tritely known as *Daisy Cutters* because they cut down everything close to the ground. The 500 mile trip up from Foggia was successful; for, this time, as we turned away from the target, being at relatively low altitude, we saw lots of smoke, dust and fires in the area where the bombs fell.

The next day, I gathered from the Intelligence Officer that 10 different airfields and supply dumps had been hit by the various Groups from the 15th Air Force. (G.H.N., 1991)[36]

Note: The use of fragmentation bombs is inconsistent with the letter Neilson wrote on the evening after the mission, in which he stated that each plane dropped twelve five hundred pound bombs. These would be demolition type bombs. Clearly, however, fragmentation bombs were used by George's group during missions in March and April when airfields and tactical targets were attacked.

Never have I seen so many planes in the sky at one time

"George Birthington's Washday"

Well, today, we had something novel, in the way of a bombing mission. Today was supposed to have been the greatest effort ever made by the

air power of the Allies over Europe. For every effective aircraft of the American and English, operating from England + Italy, was supposed to have been put in the air against rail + communications targets in southern Germany! The object of the mission was to have every outfit attack a separate rail yard + town, in order to have all the hitherto un-hit towns feel the weight of Allied air power. All the targets were supposed to be "as-yet-unbombed." The object was to hit every town in southern Germany!

So, Kiefer + I flew the No. 4 position in the first wave of the 97th! Never have I seen so many planes in the sky at one time. The sky was filled with bombers as we swept across the Adriatic, up towards the Alps.

The scheme was new + unheard of, in the annals of heavy bombardment! We climbed slowly + surely + only gained enough altitude to get over the Alps. We went over northern Italy + the Tyrolean Alps at only 14,000 feet, just barely clearing the high peaks of the mountains. Then, when we reached the penetration control point, which was on the northern slopes of the Alps, east of Innsbruck in Austria, we let down, instead of climbing as usual. At the control point, every group broke up + each squadron went on its merry way up into southern Germany, each in quest of a separate rail marshalling yard. So, there must have been about 50 different targets being attacked around 1:00 p.m. today!

The only thing that went wrong was that the entire area north of the Alps was socked in with cirrus clouds so that you couldn't see the sky, the ground or anything. Therefore, there became a situation where hundreds of planes were circling southern Germany, in the bad weather.

It was a very new and frightening experience to be gliding down around a German city

The orders were to bomb at the altitude where the target would be visible. The bombardiers were told that if they were unable to synchronize on their run, they were to try it again + again. Well, Ma, we circled + circled + descended + descended, in our attempt to pick up the target, visually! At length, we were at 8,900 ft., perhaps the lowest a B-17 group has ever bombed from! Still the weather was bad, we went through snow, rain, sleet + icing conditions for a solid hour! Our target was Memmingen,

a small town 23 miles from Munich. We made 3 bomb runs before the lead bombardier could make a successful bomb run. Each time we went over the target, we went down lower.

Believe me, it was a very new + frightening (+still thrilling) experience to be gliding down around a German city, just as if we were letting down over Foggia. We could see people in the streets + the town looked like a peaceful hamlet! Perhaps no Nazi activity ever took place in the vicinity! The people were probably amazed at a formation of heavy bombers coming so low over their town. Then on their third run, 7 big birds let go their burden of 12 500 lb. bombs each. 21 tons of bombs fell on a group of railroad tracks, switches + freight cars! None hit the residential area, for we could see every bomb hit its mark!

Then, we were supposed to climb up, back to the rally point. However, the unexpected bad weather which probably limited the success of the overall force of the mission, caused us to have to climb through 15,000 feet of "soup," in order to break through on top of the overcast! It became impossible to reassemble the groups, so each squadron had to climb up to 20,000 ft. alone + come back by itself! So, everybody seemed to be struggling across the Alps like a herd of cows. Every now + then, one could see a P-51 or a P-38 sitting up above us like a watchdog waiting for its herd to come out of the pasture (the pasture being the enemy territory beyond the Alps).

The target we hit was not so very far from Garmisch-Partenkirchen where the Germans once held their winter Olympic Games

I believe that this raid will go down as one of the lowest that a B-17 has ever bombed from 8500 feet. It certainly was quite an experience to climb over the Alps, then to let down on the northern slopes + play around in Germany, so low that they could throw stones at you! In a P-47 or a B-25, it would be well + good! As far as using a high altitude bomber for such a mission, it was just a case of using all types of planes on a mission that would have been handled by medium bombers, if it was on an ordinary scale.

The target we hit was not so very far from Garmisch-Partenkirchen where the Germans once held their winter Olympic Games! You see, they

anticipate a withdrawal of Kesselring's troops from northern Italy, for a stand in south Germany, around Berchtesgaden + Munich. So, if supply + communication lines can be easily disrupted, then now is the time to do it, before all of Germany's armies become encased in their final, ultimate tomb of southern Germany.

So, it amounted to a 7 ½ hour flight. It seemed like a long, long trip down the Adriatic + into Foggia, today! Too long for tired fellows! Just now, I am in the process of "sweating out" progress of one kind + another in relation to rank, etc. We'll just have to be patient, because things are not like they were when the war first began, anymore! However, I have hopes of a promotion, before too long!

In the meantime, I have been absorbing many of the experiences of aerial combat that will make blood-curdling stories in days when we all lose our war-born courage and become spineless civilians once again! Just now, such tales are a part of each day's labors. For, something happens every day that makes it different, more scaring or something interesting at least.

P.S. We had fresh eggs on toast, in the tent tonight. (1 pkg. cigarettes = 4 eggs.) (2/22/45)

(Appendix I-16)

George's statement that the bombing at Memmingen may have involved the lowest altitude ever for B-17s could well be true. During the first raid at the Ploesti oil complex on August 1, 1943 the heavies flew at altitudes of two hundred to six hundred feet up the Danube and over the target. However, only B-24s were deployed on that mission.[37]

Today was a day of rest for me, arising at 9:30, shaving, showering + eating fried eggs on toast in the tent, with Foster! Then, I sat down + read some of the collection of Boston Globes which Foster had on hand! Oh yes, I took a noon nap + read some of Walt Whitman's poems too, today. Then, this evening, I went to mass + the stations of the cross, at the group chapel. (2/23/45)

One of our planes got lost in the clouds around Munich

I guess I told you that Bob would like me to visit him in Florence or perhaps Rome, at second choice. I guess I shall have to wait 'til I get a chance to get to Rome + then arrange to meet him there! So, don't look for too early a meeting between him + me. Yet, it may happen any day.

You know, one of our planes got lost in all the confusion that took place in the clouds around Munich yesterday. Guess what? They got so completely befuddled that they never knew which end was up; so, they took up a heading that they thought would take them around the flak areas of northern Italy. As a result, they flew + flew + dropped their bombs on a target of opportunity, a town with a rail station in it + kept flying until they hit the ocean! Where should they end up but in Marseille, France. Back tracking, they couldn't figure where their bombs went except that they blasted a little town off the map. Evidently, they flew right over Switzerland + might have even hit a Swiss town. If so, they were lucky they didn't get shot down over Switzerland. Anyhow, they flew back from Marseilles this morning; and the C.O. told them they were fools not to stay a week in Marseilles. (2/23/45)

Marseilles (pronounced *Mar-say'*) is a large city on the French Riviera. With respect to Switzerland, George is right about the risks. Technically a neutral country, the Swiss collaborated much with Nazi Germany. Fliers who landed or bailed out in Switzerland were held in compounds akin to POW camps and frequently mistreated. Some were released but many were detained until the end of the war.[38]

Dunn flew today + he claimed he saw Berchtesgaden, Hitler's hideout. It looked to him like it had been bombed heavily. The B-24s were supposed to go in and hit it. Our outfit hit a small rail yard between Linz + Vienna; and, Dunn said that every single bomb hit the target, something very unusual. (2/23/45)

AN ABORTED MISSION – FEBRUARY 24

On the morning of Feb. 24, the primary target was Brux; but, there was great doubt about the weather. The en route weather was cloudy and the target area was briefed as "clear." However, the weather over southern Italy was rainy, with low overcast, but with "holes" in the overcast. It was gloomy and most of us felt that a flare would go up, to cancel the mission, before we started engines. There just seemed to be no way for a formation of planes to get through the overcast and stay together.

But, there was no flare. We started engines and took off in the normal manner, forming our 340th Squadron formation. We were just under the overcast at about 6,000 ft. As we got positioned with the lead squadron in the Group, none of us could see a way through the overcast. Most of us were mumbling to ourselves and scorning the deputy wing commander, Lt. Col. *Lynn Jasper, in the lead plane, who had us circling around under the spur as he tried to find a hole that the formation could go through before the fast-moving clouds came in so that we could get "on top" of the overcast. Well, the colonel did find a hole that was just big enough for the first 3 or 4 planes to go through before the fast-moving clouds closed in. By dint of discipline the rest of the planes in the lead squadron, plus the other 3 squadrons, tried to follow since there was no signal to break-up. Soon, we were all enveloped by these thick rain clouds and in the same situation we were a few days earlier, over the Alps, this time 42 planes, all flying close together. For 10 minutes, it was impossible to see any other plane. All we could do was hold our course, hold our breath and "pray." Fortunately, before long, we did break out "on top" of the overcast; and, somehow, as if by magic, all of the other planes had disappeared. We saw not one other plane as we climbed up through the broken layers of clouds. Then, when we could see around us and knew we were free and clear, we changed course, headed east towards the Adriatic, drew our breaths and got on the radio to find out what was going on.

We got the information from the ground station at Foggia that the weather had scattered the formations. Much time had been

wasted so that there was no way the formation could be reconvened to keep the timetable for the trip to Brux. Every plane went in its own direction, seeking safety; and, within an hour all had made it back to base, wasted effort and expense occurred because of the poor judgment of the wing commander, in making a decision to try to climb through a hole in the clouds without regarding the safety of the other planes he was leading, in their futile effort to follow the lead plane. The balance of that day was spent grumbling about the wasted efforts and about the personal attributes of Col. Jasper. (G.H.N., 1991)[39]
*pseudo name

This afternoon, Kiefer, Foster + I got hooked onto an instrument calibration mission, wherein we had to check all the instruments on a brand new ship which the squadron has. This plane contains all the various radar devices, so we had to chase up + down the coast, near Bari so that Foster + Capt. Bolton, who is squadron navigator could calibrate the instruments. I never saw so many automatic devices as this new plane has. It even has a device whereby the navigator can tell us his position much more easily, by using an automatic course plotter. It is called A.P.I. (Air Pilot Indicator). I don't know what they haven't thought of yet, in the way of instruments.

I don't have much else to say today, but it is in connection with the story on this clipping that we bombed at 8500 ft., near Munich on Thursday! (2/24/45)

Two years ago today, I was nervously preparing my things for that dreadful departure from home, into the Army! For, it was on Feb. 26, that I left the house for that "last mile" into the South Station, thence to Atlantic City + you know the rest! Yes, that was not a very enjoyable day, the day that Frank Trott drove me home from the club + I parked my skates away, as you ran to + from my room trying to decide what I would need most for those first few days in the Army! So, here I am, as a result of it all, 2 years later, sitting in a tent in Italy! Well, I asked for it, didn't I?

Well, I can't think of anything else exciting to write about, tonight. It's either too exciting or not exciting enough around here. So, I'll sign off + enclose these copies of "Sad Sack." (2/25/45)

She always knows where the birds are headed

Here's another point of rumor + curiosity. Axis Sally broadcasted from Berlin the other day + said that she knew that the 97th Bomb Group was to return to the states on March 15, for training on B-29s. Now, take it for what its worth! She usually has the right dope long before we know about it! For example, she once stated that a clock in a certain squadron's orderly room was 10 minutes slow! Sure enough, it was!!! Now, how did she get that information? The worst of it all is that she always knows where the birds are headed! We can sit at the radio around 10:00 a.m., while the boys on the mission are en route to the target + she's liable to come on + say, "The bombers are coming up to Vienna + we'll be waiting!" We who didn't go to briefing would then learn about it, for the first time, before the boys get to the target! That's a sad situation, isn't it? "Tokyo Rose" does the same thing to the boys in the Pacific. It speaks not too well for the safeguarding of military information! (2/26/45)

The big event today was a softball game between the officers and the enlisted men, out on the corn or wheat field, behind the squadron area. They played two games; and, I played 2nd base in the first game and was umpire in the second, so that a fellow could take my place into the game! It was a nice warm day + all those who weren't on the mission schedule took turns at it. Of course, the enlisted men won the game; but, we all had a good time!

I received January's copy of Bostonia, from B.U. I notice by the honor roll that there is a *"George M. Neilson" who has been killed in action. He, too, was a lieutenant; but, he was a member of the class of 1945 at the College of Education! I mention it because some comment might possibly reach you to the effect that they had read about me!

I've noticed that for the past few nights, I've slept better than I ever have since arriving here. I guess it was due to the physical exhaustion from the exciting missions, as well as flying 5 times in 8 days. I know that I, and

no one else, sleeps very soundly! They have a wake-up man to awaken the boys on the mission; but, everybody is awake, anyhow. The navigator in the next tent, Scotty Campbell, from Springfield, stays awake + smokes cigarettes 7 nights a week. Other fellows have other nervous reactions, at which I have had none so far. I am only commenting on how unusually sound I have been sleeping lately. Well, I'm "on the team," tomorrow. So I must go to bed early. (2/27/4)

*1Lt. George M. Neilson, US Army, of Suffolk County, Massachusetts died of injuries.[40]

MISSION #17 – VERONA, ITALY – FEBRUARY 28

This was a short, 300 mile trip up along the Italian shore of the Adriatic, past Venice, to Verona (in peacetime, famous for its wines). On this occasion, the assignment was to hit the railroad yards and storage buildings which lay just south of the Alps, at the southern end of the Brenner Pass, where everything that supplied the troops in northern Italy flowed, by road or by rail. This was a small attacking force, 2 groups.

The critical targets, such as rail yards, oil refineries and storage depots had to be constantly re-hit by the bombers, because they were so vital to the German effort. These facilities were constantly being rebuilt or replaced on a 24 hr. work schedule, as needed, to get the facility back into operation. Also, the percentage of bombing efficiency often left these targets only partially damaged or not damaged at all. Despite heavy anti-aircraft fire and some damage to our plane, our Group did a good job on the rail yards (not the wineries) at Verona. (G.H.N., 1991)[41]

Well, we went up + hit 'em a lick," today. For the first time since I have been over here, our course took us directly up through Italy! Most of the time, we go out over the Adriatic + fly up over Yugo, or at least up the center of the Adriatic. But, today, we went right up over the mainland, right over Florence + across the front lines into northern Italy. Our target was at Verona, the southern end of the Brenner Pass route, where the supplies + traffic funnel into Italy from Austria +

Germany! It's not too pleasant a spot, that foot hill city of the Alps which serves as a stockyard for the Germans. In fact, Verona is one of the more bitterly defended targets on the list! Anyhow, we carried 1000 lb. bombs, for the first time since I've been here; and we got a bird's eye view of central Italy.

This racket is all "in the mind"

The anti-climactic return trip was down over the water per usual. Today, there was nothing unusual going on, so I switched on the radio compass, which was pointed at the Foggia station; and, I listened to Richard Crooks + his Firestone program, as it was rebroadcast; there is a great feeling that comes with listening to a program of music while flying in an airplane, especially en route home from a mission! It seems to add a feeling of humanity + a realization that life still exists, at such a critical period in a combat day!

Since it is psychologically imperative for a thinking person to devise his own methods of mental relaxation + pressure relief from the fierce mental hazards which one endures up until target time, I get extreme pleasure out of thinking of how smooth + calm the planes act as they "coast" downhill towards home. They seem to boil + roar + strain as they drag their load up over the target. Then, on the way home the power settings are reduced + the engines seem to hum + purr as the formations descend peacefully down the middle + over the Adriatic. Then, if you can tune in some music, you can actually fly + feel like you are out on a Sunday afternoon drive in the placid countryside! Of course, bombardiers and navigators are scared or at least "reserved," from takeoff until landing! That is more because they can't adopt a philosophy that has to do with the condition + capabilities of the airplane! You know, this racket is all "in the mind." It all depends upon whether or not you can mentally conquer unpleasant scenes, whether you get by or not! (2/28/45)

(See Appendix I-17)

Combat Fatigue

"Combat fatigue," as the World War II version of today's post-traumatic stress disorder was often called, was a huge problem recognized by the air force. Flight surgeons were busy helping the men who reached the end of their capacity to fly into combat. It was more serious in the days when losses were much higher than in 1945. The postwar cinema *Twelve O'clock High* portrayed the effects of this when the tough talking, "fearless" 918th Bomb Group Brigadier General Frank Savage, boarding a heavy bomber for a mission over Germany, was suddenly struck from the cumulative effects of deadly aerial combat. He suffered a kind of mental paralysis in which he could only stare despondently into space for some time. Commanders were aware that they could push the airmen (and soldiers) only so far before they would begin to crack.[42]

For bomber crews, there were particular sources of extreme anxiety. Donald Miller[43] described this:

> Crewmen on heavy bombers were susceptible to a special kind of fear. They experienced what psychiatrists called phobic states, where disabling anxiety showed itself only when they were exposed to a particular situation, whether it be foul weather or a fighter attack.... Short of being hit by enemy fire, the most frightening experience in the air was a feeling of helplessness over the target – the utter inability to evade danger.... On the bomb run, an experience akin to a German mother and her children cowering in their coal cellar with the air raid sirens screaming, random luck alone determined who lived and who died. All the bomber crews could do was hunker down and take it; there was no way to relieve the rising tension. In the exploding flak, airmen stood alone in the face of fear. As Freud wrote, "the essence of the traumatic situation is the experience of helplessness."

Well, come to find out, a lot of little towns in Switzerland were hit that day

I also got a letter from one of my buddies at Gulfport, who is now in England. He described how it was to go over Berlin + Magdeburg, the 8th's big targets!

Remember the day we went to Munich at such a low altitude, + I told you about the planes getting separated + bombing on their own hook. Well, come to find out, a lot of little towns in Switzerland were hit that day + they're trying to track down fellows who got lost that day + bombed targets of opportunity, when they did not know where they were. If they can pin it on them, it will certainly go hard on them; for, God knows, that our relations with Switzerland are strained as it is, without adding more fuel to the fire. More Swiss towns have been bombed by stray bombs than you can imagine! Then, too, lots of American fliers go down in Switzerland + become disliked when they take exception to internment! So, right now it looks like they got into another mess by telling the boys to bomb any town they saw, if they didn't hit the main target! Talk about German ruthlessness! Whenever planes have bombs that stick + don't go over the target, they always try to hit something on the way home, if they remedy the difficulty. Many times, they pick prominent buildings, which often turn out to be hospitals + churches, just as the Germans hit them in England!

I know that Kiefer + I always make sure that our bombs go into an open field if they don't go on the target, rather than hitting some defenseless town or building! Turn some of these crews loose with a load of bombs + just watch the results!! Wow! (2/28/45)

I guess that I forgot to tell you, yesterday, that we flew right up over the front lines of northern Italy, via Leghorn, Florence, etc. I noticed that you couldn't see any military activity on the ground. Not only that but it appeared like much of the snow had disappeared from most of the ground, except the hills + mountains. At least it looked like there was very little snow. So, perhaps the heavy snow + fierce winter has subsided somewhat in northern Italy. I was surprised, for we flew right over enemy + friendly forces, yet you couldn't tell that there were any soldiers on the ground. In

all probability, we flew right over Bob's head, but he didn't know it, except that he might notice that he saw the heavy bombers for the first time. I guess that they decided to give the boys up front a chance to see the "big ones." However, they couldn't see much of us but silver dots in the sky, although we could see the ground, plainly. (3/1/45)

Little did George know as he flew over the front in the Apennine Mountains that day, that his brother lay in a forward field hospital, having been shot by a German sniper. The drama that was to play out as the spirit of family brought the two brothers together in an alpine Italian farmhouse is one of the most moving and somber episodes of the George H. Neilson war memoirs.

MISSION # 18---KLAGENFURT, AUSTRIA

This mission came two days after the Linz trip. It was to hit a railroad yard marshalling complex, at Klagenfurt, Southern Austria. It was the proverbial "Milk Run". There was no enemy opposition, and it was a short trip.--- a few anti-aircraft bursts, low and some distance away from our formation. Flight Crews get the same credit for all missions---the tough ones and the easy ones.

MISSION # 19----MEMMINGEN, SOUTHERN GERMANY

On Feb.22, we went to the same target that had been assigned on the day that bad weather and cloud-cover had hidden the airfields in southern Germany. This time, the weather was good, our group broke up into squadron-only "boxes" as soon as we crossed the Danube River.

Our assignment was to drop fragmentation bombs onto the airfields. This was the first time that we carried fragmentation bombs. These bom' were dropped in clusters. When they hit the ground, they exploded in a horizontal trajectory, for the purpose of destroying airplanes, equipment, and personnel if they were in the path. They just made a mess of everything, as opposed to the heavy, penetrating,devastation done bythe 500 or 250 lb. nombs which we usually carried. These frag. bombs were tritely known as " maisy Cutters " because they cut down evrything close to the ground. The 500 mile trip up from Foggia was successfull; for, this time, as we turned away from the target, beng at relatively low altitude, we saw lots of smoke, dust and fires in the area where the bombs fell.

The next day, I gathered from the Intelligence Officer that 10 different airfields and supply dumps had been hit, by the various Groups from the 15th Air Force.

AN ABORTED MISSION---FEB 24

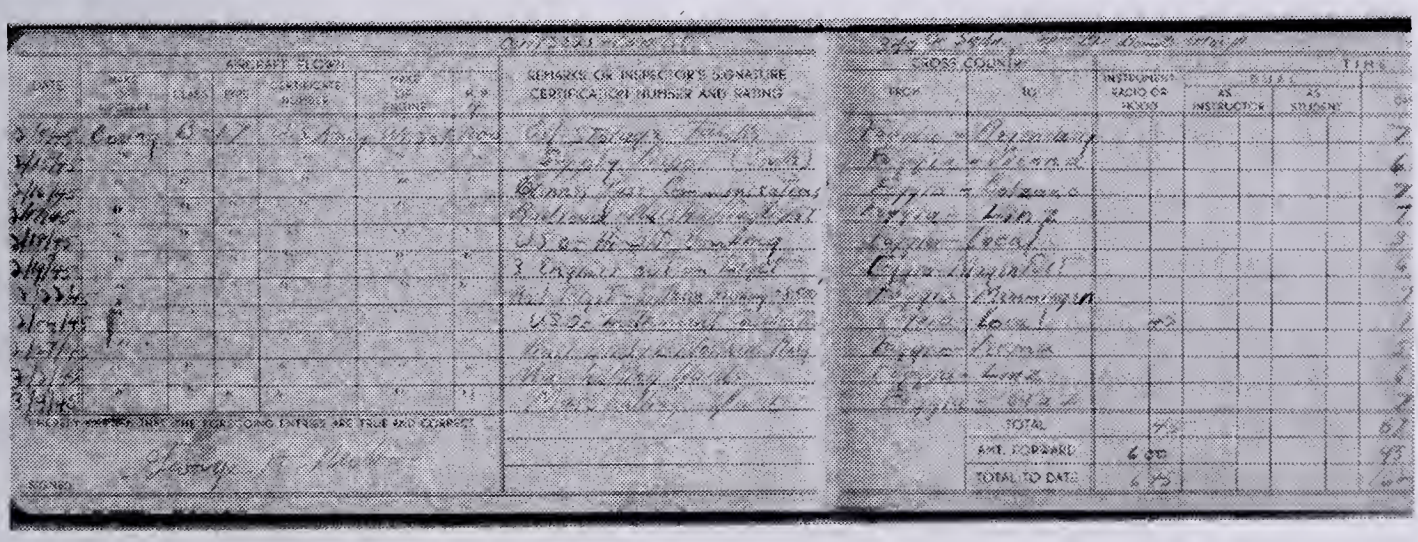
On the morning of Feb.24, the primary target was Brux; but, there was great doubt about the weather. The enroute weather was cloudy and the target area was briefed as " clear ". However, the weather over southern ITaly was rainy, with low overcast, but with "holes" in the overcast. It was gloomy and most of us felt that a flare would go up, to cancel the mission, befoe we started engines. There just seemed to be no way for a formation of planes to get through the overcast and stay together.

But, there was no flair. We started engines and took off in the normal manner, forming our 340th Squadron formation. We were just under the overcast at about 6000 ft. As we got positioned with the Lead Squadron in the Group, none of us could see a way through the overcast. Most of us were mumbling to ourselves and scorning the Deputy Wing Commander, Lt. Col. Floyd Cofer, in the lead plane, who had us circling around under the Spur as he tried to find a hole that the formation could go through before the fast-moving clouds came in so that we could get " on top "of the overcast. Well, the Colonel did find a hole that was just big enough for the first 3 Or 4 planes to go through before the fast-moving clouds closed-in. By dint of discipline the rest of the planes in the lead squadron, plus the other 3 squadrons, tried to follow since there was no signal to break-up. Soon, we were all enveloped by these thick rain-clouds and in the same situation we were a few days earlier, over the Alps---this time 42 planes, all flying close together. For 10 minutes, it was impossible to see any other plane. All we could do was hold our course, hold our breath and " pray " Fortunately, before long, we did break out " on top " of the overcast; and, somehow, as if by magic all of the other planes had

Page from George's 1991 memoirs, *A World War II Experience*.

Map showing Fifteenth AF mission territory, including pencil notation for Blechhammer and Brux.

Pilot Log cover



Page from Lt. Neilson's official Pilot Log.

Chapter 19

Combat Missions and Meeting at Army Field Hospital, March 1945

Amendola Air Base
Foggia, Italy, and Pistoia, Italy

Breaking the Enemy Resolve

As spring came to the damp, muddy plains of southeastern Italy, the final act in the long European war was shaping up. The Soviets were closing in on Berlin, and the western Allies were postured to cross the Rhine. The inevitable meeting of Russian and American forces on the Elbe River was approaching. When that occurred, it would mean that the situation for Nazi Germany on the giant chessboard of war was "check," his king being surrounded, his escape imperiled.

Though the German surrender was a little more than a month away, the war was far from over as measured by its intensity. The Allied bombing reached its peak in March with 170,000 tons of bombs dropped on Germany, 102,000 by the USAF.[1] Some of it was overkill, of which Miller[2] offered this explanation:

> Wars between powerful nations have a built-in dynamic, a demonic capacity for acceleration and excess, not necessarily by deliberate decision, but by process of harnessing a people's emotional and material resources to total victory...So American bomber boys continued to fly and die in excess of the numbers needed to dismantle the enemy's war machine, whereas in the first years of the conflict they had flown and died in numbers insufficient to the task.

The terror bombing controversy was never fully resolved as Allied air command struggled continuously with the idea of intentionally bombing areas of high-civilian density. Yet the official policy of the US Air Forces was to avoid targets where noncombatants were present in large numbers.[3]

The German armies had evacuated Danzig (Gdansk in today's Poland) as the Soviets rushed to capture the prize, Berlin, which the Soviet command had on March 9 ordered seasoned Generals Zhukov and Konev to capture as soon as possible. The Red Army moved quickly across Poland and reached the Oder on Germany's eastern frontier on April 16.[4]

On the night of March 22, American troops under Gen. George Patton crossed the Rhine River, followed by the British the next day. One million Allied men participated in the Rhine crossing. This Operation Plunder included a diversionary mission, an aerial strike on Berlin by six Fort groups of the Fifteenth, which traveled over eight hundred miles to the limit of their range, while fifteen Liberator Groups went for jet bases in Neuberg, Munich, and points in Czechoslovakia. The expected fierce defense of the Rhine front never materialized. Nineteen thousand demoralized German troops surrendered to the Allies at the bridgehead. By the end of the day on March 23, 80,000 British and Canadian troops were six miles deep, soundly on the east bank of the Rhine. Having achieved this symbolic landmark, the western Allies were posed to overrun the German homeland and reach the Elbe River, as agreed upon at Yalta.[5]

The Wehrmacht counterattacked in Hungary but was stopped by the Russian advance on Vienna.[6] The campaign in the south was marked by cooperation between the Soviet army and the Anglo-American air forces, this because of the close proximity of the Red Army to the bombing targets as the borders of the Reich compressed.

Despite the weakening of the German ground armies, there was actually a resurgence in fighter activity ascribed to the Me262 turbo jets.[7] Jet fighters in great numbers attacked a force of 1,329 bombers and seven hundred fighters bound for Berlin on March

18. Seven Fortresses were destroyed in eight minutes. These Me262s were armed with R4M air-to-air rockets. In the operation, six Mustangs and thirteen heavies were shot down. It was the fiercest air battle of 1945. By the end of March, these prowling next-generation planes had destroyed sixty-three four-engine bombers.[8]

The jets were not invulnerable, and Mustang pilots learned how to use their own maneuverability to meet the turbo challenge with superior numbers. *Rat catching,* hovering over the airdromes and waiting for the jets to take off or land and blowing them up on the ground, helped eliminate the turbo menace.[9] There were not enough of the turbos to mount a war-changing challenge to the Allied bombing fleets on the Reich, but their presence in the skies late in the war intimidated and menaced the bomber fleets in their relentless assault on the remains of the Third Reich.

In addition to the famed "Checkertails" of the 325th Fighter Group, another group of fighters known as the "Red Tails" escorted the bombers to Berlin. The Red Tails are known to history as the Tuskegee Airmen, the 332nd Fighter Group in the Fifteenth AF, an all-black fighter unit established by Hap Arnold to address, at least in part, the problem of racial discrimination in the armed services. Many of these fliers became distinguished by their service. Yet despite risking their lives over the skies of Germany during the war, they faced discrimination and deprivation of civil rights after the war. Claims of their achievements have often been the subject of myth and exaggeration as well as fact, as Tillman[10] asserts. Still, eighty men of the 332nd Red Tails died overseas. "Their legacy requires no exaggeration. When it counted most, they volunteered and showed up."[11]

As spring descended on the weary, war-torn continent, the stiff resolve of the German Wehrmacht began to melt, and the demoralized soldiers and civilians alike were turning their anger on the chieftains of the six-year rampage over Europe. The bombing contributed greatly to this demoralization. After fighting courageously on the front lines, they knew their hometowns were being pummeled, their families killed or scattered. Their will to resist the enemy plummeted. It was so among the civilian

population of Germany also, yet this discouragement and hope for surrender did not frequently produce a sense of remorse for their country's role in the war. Allied occupiers found the German population, at least in rural areas, oblivious (at least in word) to Nazi atrocities and generally in denial of involvement with the party. Yet the bombing did at last undermine the grip of loyalty the leaders had on the people. Miller illustrates:

> "We have the Fuehrer to thank for this," a man from bomb ravaged Düsseldorf had the guts to say in front of an SS soldier. In early 1945, increasing numbers of provincial investigators working for the SD began to report a general refusal to give the Hitler salute, and more than a few vocal housewives saw the raids as divine revenge for the atrocities committed against the Jews. One prophetic woman blurted out in public that this war was "easy" for the fuehrer. "He doesn't have to look after a family. If worst comes to worst in the war, he'll leave us all in the mess and put a bullet through his head!"[12]

As the ring began to close on the Third Reich, the war was also coming home to the Japanese people. Having captured the Mariana Islands, 1500 miles from Tokyo, bases on Tinian and Saipan became jump-off points for US B-29 Superfortress attacks on Japan. On March 9, 1945, US warplanes dropped more than two thousand tons of incendiary bombs on Tokyo. More than 350 bombers flying at just five hundred feet dropped their loads downtown and over the crowded Tokyo suburb of Shitamachi where three-quarters of a million people lived and worked in wood-framed houses. The incendiaries created a firestorm fed by thirty-knot winds. So bad was the devastation that crewmen could smell burning flesh from their airplanes.[13]

Today was another grand, warm + clear day, here around "la Fogge." The weather is getting to be much like it gets at home during late April

or early May! The weather has been so good that the birds have flown for 16 consecutive missions, which, naturally, is a longer stretch than we have flown since I've been around here. It looks like finally the weather has changed. Mud is giving way to dust; so, perhaps we'll get the other extreme of the two-phase southern Italy weather! For, I understand that it never rains during the summer season, around here. Instead, they have plenty of dust.

Oh, I must mention that the price of eggs in the "business district" of Foggia has gone down to 3 eggs for 1 package of cigarettes (about 30 cents per egg). (3/1/45)

MISSION #18 – LINZ, AUSTRIA – MARCH 2

On March 2, we drew the assignment to hit the bridge across the Danube, which carried traffic from the city of Linz to the suburbs. The highlight of this mission was the "critical" situation at takeoff.

Usually, when we were all lined up for takeoff, waiting to get onto the metal mat runway, there was an operations officer, in a *jeep, located at the beginning of the runway, to make certain that each plane took off in a 30-second interval behind the plane ahead of it. With a relatively inefficient runway, with its lumpy contours, and with a plane with a full load of bombs (usually a B-17 carried 12-500 lb. bombs to the target), 30 seconds seemed like a minimum of time as we used most of the runway. In the process of takeoff, the 4 rotating propellers create a swirl of air, like a tornado parallel to the ground that flowed behind the plane, especially after full speed was attained. This was known as "prop-wash." It generally created a turbulence that made it bumpy for the following aircraft to take off through. This was a disturbing factor to all pilots who felt that they were going to just barely get their planes off the ground. When there was a breeze, which generally there was not, early in the morning, the prop-wash dissipated rather quickly. But, most often, it seemed to "hang" on the runway and became a true, not imagined, hazard to stability of the aircraft flying through it.

On this morning, there was no breeze. Lo and behold, the operations officer was signaling all the planes off at 20-second intervals. Why? Because there was a need to make up some lost time in order to get the planes into formation, meet the rendezvous timetable with other Groups and then be on time at the target area. So, as the fully-loaded planes struggled into the air, when just off the ground and with minimum flying speed, each one, in turn, hit the prop-wash. The planes rocked from side to side, with wings tipping up and down, like a fighter in the ring knocked off of his feet. It felt helpless since there is never much control as the plane leaves the ground with barely enough speed to fly, usually.

Nobody crashed, although several came close. But, there was one more factor to add to the tenuous event. When the planes were "topped-off" with fuel, after the pre-takeoff engine warm-up, as was the case for maximum effort missions where all possible fuel was needed, when the plane got to a level position on the takeoff roll, each of the 4 main gasoline tanks developed a surge as the momentum of the plane accelerating forced the fuel to move backwards. A siphon was created through the tank caps resulting in a steady flow of fuel and fuel-vapor off the trailing edge of the wing. In direct line of these siphons were the engine exhaust gasses, pumping at full force from the open throttles and high pressure turbo-superchargers. This lasted for all of the takeoff roll and a few minutes into the air while the engines consumed the "topping" fuel.

All told, the shortness of time between planes, plus the full load of fuel and bombs, plus the siphon, made for a breath-taking event, the most vivid of all takeoffs I ever made, in any plane. Once again, the difficult mental strains come from the events and things you have no control over, playing follow-the-leader in an organized formation flying effort.

The mission worked out good. We did not need all the fuel we carried. Fortunately, I guess that we were "topped-off" because there were concerns, due to weather, of having to go to a choice of alternate targets, which would require more time in the air than the

original target. We hit the bridge [and] knocked out the roadway to be rebuilt, probably within a week after we hit it. (G.H.N., 1991)[14]
*The ubiquitous army car was officially named a General Purpose Vehicle. The short form was GP for general purpose, but this nomenclature devolved into the word jeep.

Well, I was up in the "wild blue" again today! We were at 29,000 ft., today. That was as high as I've been for quite some time, and, I would just as soon have been a great deal higher. We went to Linz, in Austria. Linz, as I have mentioned before, is a main rail junction between Munich + Vienna, from which supplies are fed to Italy, through the Alps. Now that Blechhammer is "finis" (Russians) and now that Germany has given up the ghost at Brux (probably fearing the Russian advance), Linz is one of the roughest targets. You see, the long, long hauls are now by the board, because the Russians have taken Silesia + the Germans are back tracking. So, now, the principal targets are Munich + vicinity, Vienna, Linz, + the Brenner Pass group!

Anyway, I'm over the "hump," of my trips, 18 sorties out of 35 for a total of 30 missions! We were once again aided by an undercast of clouds, which ranged from northern Italy up over the Alps + into Austria. We never saw the ground, once we left the spur, until we got back to the spur! It was all done by that magic radar device called "Miki" navigators + bombing as well! (3/2/45)

(See Appendix I-18)

The mission count was not necessarily equivalent to sorties. Some sorties (according to danger level, especially in the earlier years) were given double mission credit, some less than single credit, and there were points accumulated for such factors as attending briefings and call-backs.

My mail, today, included a letter from you, Betty, dated Jan. 21, which had these 2 pictures of you laying in the snow at *North Conway and the **rotogravure pictures of the ice-boating on the lakes. Thanks, very much! I haven't had a good picture of you, Betty; so, I was more than pleased to

get it! Foster says that you look "just like me" + Dunn said, "How old is she?" (3/2/45)
*resort town in New Hampshire's White Mountains
**a printing process

I'm really so mentally flabbergasted, most of the time that I don't suppose that I make myself clear in my letters. But, I do all I can to relieve my mind of the torture that it could endure, if I gave it the chance! I only hope that this is the most dangerous + most vivid + terrifying part of my life. Yes, I know what this war is all about. But, you'd be surprised to note the amount of humor that surrounds a mission, even a rough one. Believe me, too, religion is a great comfort when you are placed in danger beyond your power to control!

Well, I'm going to try + get to Florence tomorrow, to see Bob! I don't know how far I'll get; but, I'll try anyhow! Thanks for all the mail, papers, etc. Words do not describe their comforting effect! (3/2/45)

VISIT WITH MY BROTHER ROBERT C. NEILSON, PISTOIA, ITALY – [MARCH 3-6, 1945]

One day in February, Lt. "Whitey" Lykins, of Pennsylvania, whom I met during the boat ride en route to Italy and who was assigned to our neighbor 342nd squadron, came to me and indicated that he had gotten a letter stating that my brother Bob was in serious condition at a field hospital, in Pistoia, a small village north of Florence. This message had come from an army nurse whom we both had met on the boat and who had become a friend of Whitey's. She was in duty at the field hospital and saw Bob's name on the dog-tag and associated it with my name. Being at a field hospital always meant a "critical," "life-or-death" situation.

Immediately, I secured a pass from my squadron commander and began hitch-hiking my way to find my brother. There was always plenty of military transportation, en route; so, it was mostly a case of hooking-on with someone who was going the way you were trying to go. I got to Rome by courier plane. Then, I got a supply truck to Florence. En route to Florence, the truck stopped

at Siena, a medieval preservation of a walled city; so, I had about an hour to get the tourist version of Siena. From Florence, I got a ride in an ambulance en route to Pistoia. I was directed to a little hillside farmhouse in a very mountainous area. It was the field hospital where Bob was. As I left the ambulance, I could hear the noise of anti-aircraft artillery in the area, as well as ground artillery. As I approached the house, I was impressed with the huge pile of blood-soaked bandages piled up like a dirty pile of snow. Inside, the rooms were a combination of recovery wards and operating rooms. In the "operating" rooms, doctors worked feverishly to save the lives of wounded army soldiers. The definition of a field hospital is a place where wounded people are brought immediately from the front lines as wounded and determined to be life-or-death cases who might not survive for a trip further back to regular hospitals.

The activity of the doctors included removal and/or repair of limbs; removal of shrapnel from the torso as well as additional gruesome procedures necessary to preserve life. Everything one could observe was very bloody and heart-rending, especially to the newly arrived non-medical type like myself. This was amidst the battle for break-through by the Allied troops, out of the Apennine Mountains and into the Po River Valley.

I introduced myself to the obviously very busy medical teams and I quickly met Mary [Reilley], the nurse who had identified Bob, expressing my gratitude for getting word to me. She pointed Bob out to me. But, as I surveyed the beds in the room where he was, I had trouble identifying him, even after looking at him directly three times, because he was in such bad shape. Then, I saw a faint smile as he recognized me. It certainly was the most emotional family meeting of all my life. He had been shot in the intestines. They made a colostomy for him, after removing a piece of his large intestine. He was in the recovery stage where they were waiting for him to gain strength so that they could send him back to Florence, to a base hospital. I spent two days there, feeling like a fish out of water, an Air Corps man in the midst of an army-medical crisis, with no way of contributing any value to the hard-working medics. The medical "teams" worked in 2-12

hr. shifts to perform solely life-saving procedures. When I felt that it was time to move along and return to my base, the doctors urged me to stay because they felt it would be the most vivid medical experience of my life and that I should see as much of it as I could. The doctors, themselves [seemed] enthused over the opportunity to work on procedures that they might never get a chance to perform in "normal" practice. Perhaps there was a moral of it for Bob in the fact that 2 of the 4-man surgeon team were from the Boston area, where we came from. When I departed, it was not yet clear whether Bob would survive; however, it came time to move on and get back where I belonged.

In a few days after I left, Bob was evacuated to Florence; and, as the war ended, he was flown to a hospital in Texas where he recovered completely. His colostomy was eliminated. Later in 1945, he was retired as a Captain, also as one of the few officers who served in 2 major theaters, becoming a "major" casualty in each one. Over the years from 1945 until his death in 1982, he and I reminisced many times on how that visit encouraged him to keep up the fight and strive for his recovery. Indeed, this was a major event in the lives of both of us.

From Pistoia, I hitch-hiked my way back to Florence, to Rome, to Bari and finally to Foggia. I was away from the base just 5 days. (G.H.N., 1991)[15]

Visit to Bob at Fifth Army Thirty-Second Field Hospital

It is not clear when George became aware that his brother Bob had become a major casualty, having been shot in the abdomen by a sniper's bullet in the Apennine Mountains campaign in northern Italy. He was hit on February 21. The initiation of contact from Bob's unit to George's unit, attempting to arrange a visit from George, was made because of the former's life-threatening injury, which occurred on Mt. Belvedere in the North Apennines. George's previous mention of wanting to visit Bob was unrelated to this emergency. Mary Reilley, a nurse George had met on the *Athos II* troop transport ship in October, was working at the

field hospital near Pistoia, Italy, where Bob had been taken for treatment. This miraculous connection was to prove a great blessing for the Neilson family. George received the following letter from Miss Reilley:

> 27 February
> Hello George-
>
> Look at the return address – and study the name carefully. Light up a cigarette and sit down please – 'cause the big shock is now coming up. George I might just as well be blunt—your brother Bob has been wounded by a sniper in recent enemy action. His injuries were serious – as a matter of fact George he was very ill – at first. But his condition has steadily improved and he is now on the road to recovery – which might be a long one. His most serious injury is abdominal – and you might know what that means. Anyhow George please don't worry – he'll recover and probably be better for it. He would like so very much to see you – so if you are able to come to Florence call Salute White – [?] Lightning Rear – and ask for me and we'll see about transportation and a place for you to stay.
>
> George I could have written sooner had I known Capt. Neilson was your brother – and it was purely accidental my discovery of the fact – you see – our Captain was going to try and contact you – but he didn't know how to go about it exactly. So, of course he called me into the ward and I told him – and then they inquired as to whether or not I knew the Group number. Well – when they informed me it was 97th – I took a chance and ask[ed] your first name – and if you were from Boston. Sure enough – same family.

So – please – he's been with us almost a week now – please am I forgiven –

Again I repeat – Don't worry – he's fine – as a matter of fact he's trying to discover an angle by which he will be able to have a sick leave in Capri after reading of your glorious vacation –

George – be careful. I'll write again

Love,

Mary –

Bob was directing his men, when he stopped a 30 caliber bullet in his abdomen

Well, Ma, I have not written for 4 days; but, it was for a very special reason! For, I was on an expedition up to see Bob! It took me quite some time to locate him, but I finally saw him + guess where? It was on highway "64," 40 miles above Florence, in a field hospital, some 8 miles from the lines!

Bob was wounded in the great offensive initiated by his division to take Mt. Belvedere + points north. He was wounded on Feb. 21 + he has been in this Italian farmhouse (field hospital), ever since. The outfit has made more progress than any unit the 5th Army has ever had!! Bob was directing his men, when he stopped a 30 caliber bullet in his abdomen. He told me that a sniper hit him, at a place where they were expecting snipers. So, he has spent the past 12 days in the Italian house, down in a valley by a mountain stream, where the medics have set up a field hospital!

Bob has been weakened by the nature of his injury, because he is unable to eat. However, he is now able to eat a little and is on the upgrade. I talked with the chaplain, Fr. Hays, + with the surgeons who attended him! They say that Bob will be okay + he is doing much finer than they expected! Within a day or so he will be well enough to stand the 2 ½ hour, 45 mile ambulance trip down the mountains to the great general hospital in Florence. (By the way, I was in that place + it is certainly a great building.) Of course, he is very sick because he has a "colostomy," similar to Mrs. Mather's.

Bob's diet, at the field hospital, is listed as "soft." So that you have an idea of what he gets to eat, now, this morning he got two soft-boiled eggs, cereal, coffee, prunes + buttered toast. What do you think of that for 8 miles behind the lines?

He spruced up as soon as he saw me

Now for the details: I spent Monday evening, all day Tuesday + this Morning with Bob. They all said that it did Bob a world of good for me to see him! I know it did, for he spruced up as soon as he saw me + what a difference there was in his appearance!!

Responsible for my seeing Bob at this time was a Miss Mary Ellen Reilley, a nurse who came over on the same boat with me! When Bob came into the hospital, she recognized the name + knew my address; so, she started a telegram to me. Through the strength of that telegram, I was able to get up there, immediately! When I reached Florence, I searched around 'til I contacted her, at this 32nd Field Hospital, on the front lines! I talked to her on Sunday evening from the hotel + she said for me to come up on the courier ambulance, on Monday! So, I rode up on Monday afternoon, right into the ruggedness of the Apennines!

While I was up there, Mary did all in her power to make me comfortable. She heated water for me to wash with, got my meal tray several times, etc. She was really a kind person in all ways. She even rode down to the Florence airport with me, this morning in another ambulance.

As for myself, it was the greatest experience of my life to see the artillery fire, our fighter planes shooting rockets, + just how the boys live + just what happens to them! They really should take pictures of the hospital scenes + show them to bond buyers. Of course it was not too pleasant + it was vividly reminiscent of wartime but I was glad that I could make Bob feel cheerful and happy. As for myself, I learned about just what the infantry goes through, in no uncertain terms!

I could see the guns lobbing shells into the German lines

Last evening, Mary Reilley took me to her headquarters, another Eytie house which stands high on a hill above the hospital. Upon opening

the window at night, I could see the guns lobbing shells into the German lines, amidst the glare of the artificial moonlight, spotlights. Yet, this nurse was living in an Eytie house, in comparative comfort, + she could still see the front lines firing!

Now, here's what to expect: Bob will be in a general hospital for 2 or 3 months, more than likely. Then, he'll probably come home. I'll give you Bob's hospital address as soon as it comes to me! In the meantime, write lots of letters to his original address! Bob says he'll be able to write, within a week, so you can plan accordingly! Send him any + all notices or school magazines that you can get! I gave him the crucifix which my chaplain had blessed in Rome! So, he won't want for religious articles! Now don't worry, for I'll give you any + all developments. A last, Bob says that he's anxious to get out of the service. He's had enough of it!! I guess that perhaps he has, too.

Well, I'm terribly tired tonight after not sleeping for 3 days. So, I'll close for now. Remember, I think Bob is coming along well, or else I wouldn't say so!! So, keep that in mind.

P.S. Bob gets the Purple Heart. (3/7/45)

The next day, George wrote another letter providing more details and repeating some. In the letter he indicated that the he would give the story just as he had to Bob's wife, Kay, that same morning. Since much of this letter is like the previous one to Ma, it is not out of the question that he confused the previous day's letter to Ma and Betty and the one he wrote to Kay on the morning of March 8. He may have repeated parts since he could not exactly recall what he wrote in each letter. Included here are non-duplicated excerpts from the letter.

All the rooms of the house were filled with cots which contained the injured boys

I spent Saturday in a vain attempt to get a ride to Florence, a distance of some 200 miles, because the weather was bad! But Sunday, I got a ride on a B-25 to Siena, a beautiful northern Italy city, southwest of Florence. Then, I went by R.A.F. truck to Florence Sunday evening. It took me

until 10:30 to locate Bob's hospital, because I didn't get any too good information from the general hospital, in the town. Finally, I got through to the hospital + talked with Mary Reilley who told me that the morning courier ambulance would pick me up + bring me back up the highway! At that time, her only words about Bob were, "To tell you the truth, he was pretty sick for 48 hours, but he's coming along now."

After spending the night at the "Anglo-American" Hotel, I was picked up by the courier ambulance, at 5th Army Headquarters + made the 2 ½ hour, 40 miles ride up the mountainous, winding "Highway 64." I reached the place where Bob was, just 10 miles behind the lines, at 4:40! The 32nd Field Hospital was using an Italian rural residence, some wealthy person's country home, for their hospital!

The place was down in a valley between two mountains, right beside a swift mountain stream. It had more of an appearance of a cider mill or a grist mill, than anything else. All the rooms of the house were filled with cots which contained the injured boys. Outside, there were the prefabricated shacks which the surgeons use. By the way, the nurse told me that the best surgeons are right in those field hospitals + not back at the general hospitals!

When I first saw Bob, it was evident that the 13-days since the day he was hit, Feb. 21, had taken its toll of his strength and his weight because he was unable to eat! But he smiled + he is in excellent spirits. I was with him until he got a bit nervous, on Monday evening, all day Tuesday + I left Wednesday morning at 8:00.

On Tuesday, the doctors, nurses + aides told me that my coming to see him had helped him immensely; and, I noticed that he was relaxed, calm + cheerful, always joking! For two days, he had been on a diet of food, for the first time! They gave him for breakfast on Tuesday, for example: two boiled eggs, hot cereal with canned milk, stewed prunes + hot buttered toast, by far a better meal than we ever get; and, mind you, this is all within range of German artillery! Naturally, Bob is unable to eat much of his food; but, the fact that they give it to him + that he can eat some of it is encouraging!

The nature of his operation which came as a result of the bullet wound, makes it difficult for him to eat, because gas forms and irritates the large operation incision. As you know, he has a colostomy; consequently, he

drains or rather eliminates through the large bowel which protrudes through his stomach wall. His stomach was not injured by the wound fortunately. He urinates normally + in the normal manner; so, there's nothing wrong with his kidneys or bladder!

It seems reasonably certain that he won't have to go back to action

The doctors say that as soon as they make an adjustment in his incision stitching, he'll be making the trip down the mountain to the general hospital, either at Pistoia or Florence. Either one is a beautiful, modern hospital. You must remember that northern Italy has fine, modern, wealthy cities. And I was inside the 24th General Hospital at Florence. It's quite a place! Perhaps today or tomorrow, he will be moved there! There is the 70th + the 24th, either one of which he might be moved to!

Bob will probably be 2 or 3 months in convalescence, whether they'll keep him there or send him to Naples or home or what is yet to be found out. It seems reasonably certain that he won't have to go back to action. Bob, himself, thinks he'll get out of the Army; and, he definitely wants to, which is something new in his ways of thinking! He'd just as soon get back to the Woven Hose Company + begin working again. He feels like he's been in long enough!

Bob wants you to know that he is doing well + he says that he'll start to write letters, in about one week. So, you may have an idea about when to expect to hear from him!

There is another wonderful chaplain, who has been seeing Bob. His name is Fr. Hays, and, he comes from Syracuse. He is a wonderful man to talk to. He says, "Bob is a wonderful fellow; I've talked quite a bit with him."

The bullet went through both bowels and lodged in the flank

Bob was injured during this latest push, one of the biggest they have had on this front! It was during the operations involved in taking a final objective near Mt. Della Torracia, in the so-called Mt. Belvedere sector. The medics claim that this 10th Division are all hand-picked men, the best

they have seen in a long while! Bob says that it was a sniper's bullet that hit him, at about 11:00 a.m. He was brought to the hospital at about 4:00, which is considered good time! As I said before, the bullet went through both bowels (or hit them both), and lodged in the flank, not quite going through the other side.

One of the marvelous things that I noticed up there was that there were so many cases of blood, plasma + penicillin, they were actually tripping over them. I imagine that Bob might have gotten some blood, but he didn't know. I do know that everyone was given shots of penicillin, and at frequent intervals! Food is very plentiful up there, by the way. In fact, anything that is needed comes up the highway by truck or ambulance!

When I left yesterday a.m., I rode down in the same courier that had brought me up there! Then, I happened to catch a ride on an A.T.C. plane from Florence to Bari (2 ½ hrs.). Then, I had to ride 60 miles on open truck to Foggia, quite an experience, all in all! If Bob had not been hurt, it would have been really a wonderful experience!

The American division was pushing and firing artillery shells into enemy positions

While I was up there, Mary-Ellen Reilley was very nice to me. She heated water for me to wash with, brought me my meal trays so that I could be with Bob + did all she could to make things convenient for me. Tuesday evening, she brought me up to where the nurses live, another home high on a hill, just above the "hospital." The Italians vacated, leaving furniture and all! So, the nurses live in warm rooms, + have bureaus, soft beds, + soft chairs. She took me out on the piazza that overlooks the mountainsides, and there, you could see the battle lines off ahead! The mountainsides were lighted by terrific searchlights, because the American division was pushing + firing artillery shells into enemy positions! All of this was their home. Not too good scenery, do you think?

Bob + I talked it all over what we're going to do when the war is over, etc. Bob is ready to settle down, I guess! Well, that's all I got to tell you now. So I'd better sign off. (3/8/45)

As a final note to this emotionally moving story, it is my hope that none of the descendants of William and Anastasia Neilson should ever depart this life without knowing of the meeting of two of their sons in a farmhouse field hospital, in that war-torn valley in Italy, in March 1945. The blood and bravery of these men and their fellow soldiers must never be forgotten, their deeds having paid the price of freedom for billions of people after this, the world's most terrible conflict. Not only did the men on the front lines, in the air, and on the sea bear the pain of war, but as well did the mothers and fathers, spouses and children, siblings and friends. Their sleepless nights and endless days of anguished waiting as their sons and daughters faced constant peril must also be reckoned in the cost. Betty Neilson often expressed in the postwar years that the awful worry of having three sons at war at one time took years off of Ma Neilson's life. No one will ever know in this life the extent of the long tentacles of pain that the Axis dictators unleashed when World War II was perpetrated, then or in the decades of the Cold War that followed.

MISSION #19 – GRAZ, AUSTIRA – MARCH 9

On March 9, we were briefed for "Vienna-Main," the main railroad yards, in the center of Vienna. It was, again, a maximum effort of some 400 planes, a major share of the B-17s and B-24s, based in Italy. A maximum effort always meant precise timing problems, in order to reach the various en route rendezvous points on time. In this way, we could be sure that we were in the bomber stream and over the target, while the fighters were flying "target cover" to look after us.

For this mission, the briefing called for our Group to be at a very high altitude. On such an occasion when the B-17s went at a higher altitude, we could assume that the B-24s would be at a lower altitude, because they operated more efficiently at the lower levels. The group was assigned to go over the target at 28,500 ft., the highest of any mission that I had been assigned to. We were also briefed for extremely high winds, as we got to the higher altitudes.

It forecasted 50 m.p.h. winds, at 25,000 ft. This meant that, unless the time-distance-climb timings were perfectly synchronized with the actual winds aloft, we would have to use more engine power, and fuel, to compensate for the wind problems.

As matters developed, by the time we were at 25,000 ft., over southern Austria, the winds were at 75 m.p.h.; and we were using more power to keep up with the mission than we were briefed for, as the Group leaders had to use more power to maintain the rendezvous schedule. The engines began to strain. We always listened to the noise of the engines in the same way that a violinist listens to his violin strings, to detect any weaknesses and non-performance. We had to push the throttles through the wire-restraints, to achieve "full military power." This meant that we were forcing the engines beyond their "normal capacity" for emergency purposes; as a result we could feel vibrations of "strain." But, the job called for "keeping up" with the formation.

The engines were forced to stay at "full military power" for over 30 minutes, until #2 + #3 engines "blew." The #2 caught fire and belched smoke, while losing power immediately. The #3 got hit by flak and started to burn. We could not keep up, at this critical juncture, so we dropped down, through a carpet of black smoke, turned abruptly left to get out of the way of the following planes. With the awkwardness of flak helmets and flak vests over our normal, winter flying clothes (temperatures at minus 40°), we simultaneously turned off (feathered) the #2 engine, at the same time hitting the fire extinguisher button for #2, which automatically sprayed a suffocating stream of CO_2 gas onto the burning engine. Immediately, we feathered the #3 engine (feathering means turning the propeller by turning its angle directly into the wind so that it would no longer turn). Being in the midst of "flak" we hoped that the enemy fighters would not add to our woes. Suddenly, we were by ourselves and very vulnerable, just heading south, away from Vienna and an easy prey for the Me109 fighters lurking in the area. Yet, we were more worried about keeping the plane in the air than anything else. Being by ourselves, it was imperative

that we immediately take up a course to traverse the comparative safety of Yugoslavia.

Then, we remembered that an alternate target was "Graz," a city with railroad yards, near the Austrian border of Yugoslavia. The rail yards were briefed as an alternate target. This was about 50 miles south of Vienna. So, we headed for it, since we were already almost there after we got ourselves "together" after the damage at Vienna, and since we still had our bombs. As a single plane, it was treacherous but there seemed to be an opportunity to do some good, with our load of 12-500 lb. bombs. The 97th Group had, of course, vanished from our sight. In addition to being alone, and with just 2 engines functioning, the smoke trailing from the #2 engine was a tell-tale of a problem and a target for the enemy. With all of this circumstance, we began losing altitude and, of course, slowing down from the normal 165 m.p.h. cruising speed of a B-17.

Lt. Dunn, Bombardier, and Lt. Hendershot, Navigator, went to work to contrive a good run at the rail yards, in the center of Graz. This target had been briefed to have minimal anti-aircraft fire. In this situation, everyone in the plane had their adrenalin up, watching for flak, and keeping an eye on our faltering engines.

Graz was on our way home; so, we decided to fly north-to-south over the city. As we got ready to drop the bombs, an anti-aircraft shell hit the #4 engine. It began to smoke and fire shot out of the exhaust as well as from the cowling at the front. It immediately stopped producing power; so, we had to feather its propeller, to immediately reduce the drag. Whomever was on the ground aimed directly at us. As bombs went away, we quickly applied the one-shot CO_2 fire extinguisher system on the #4 engine. This was done by switching a dashboard control to the #4 engine and then pushing a button. Again, this resulted in a single burst of CO_2 gas being squirted over the engine, inside the exterior cowling, for the purpose of smothering the fire, which it did. During this activity, we had to forget that there was any enemy activity, in order to concentrate on first getting the fire out and then, determining if the plane was airworthy enough as a result of the gunfire, to stay in the air and attempt the trip back to Italy. There were, apparently,

several bursts of anti-aircraft fire after the plane was hit. However, the shells fell short of our path.

Now, we had only one engine, #1. We determined that we were about 375 miles from home base. We were at 23,000 ft., by this time, as we were continuously losing altitude, once we left Vienna. We set up a course that would steer us away from the Nazi forces in Yugoslavia. Lt. Hendershot began to do some calculations to see if we could get back to the base. As we were pondering our fate and getting our wits together, it was vital to make up our minds as to what, if any, blessings we had to count, besides being alive. It dawned on us that the winds that had been so strong as headwinds and against which we had to apply so much power a length of time that was not good for the engines, now had become tailwinds. This, we hoped and trusted, would be the life-saver. We were moving along at about 130 m.p.h., air speed, or about 200 m.p.h., ground speed. This seemed miraculous, considering that we had only one engine working. Of course, much of our fuel was gone and the bombs were gone; so, the plane was much lighter. It is worthy of note that in any loaded airplane, the fuel is always, by far, the most important load factor.

Rather quickly, we were over Yugoslavia, the plane was quiet and it appeared that we were drifting along, but gaining groundspeed very well, due to the winds at our tail. After about 30 minutes on our "retreat" we concluded that we could not get back to base. Our briefing "kit" made us aware of an emergency landing field at Vis, a seaside, small town on the Adriatic Coast of Yugoslavia. After plotting the distance on the map, we tried to estimate if, given the rate of descent of the plane which we could not control (We had just one engine and it was at the highest power-setting we dared to use), plus the groundspeed of the plane, it would be possible to make it to Vis. There, we knew that the U.S. Air Corps Transport Command had the emergency field, where it would be safe to land. After putting all of this into perspective, all we could do would be to drift along, constantly on a downward trajectory, trusting that all the factors would hold up so that we could make it to Vis.

It was lonesome and quiet as we "hoped" our way along, as we gazed at "Partisan controlled" Yugoslavia. It seemed like we were alone in the skies, left to challenge the fates. Then, a closer look to the rear revealed 3 P-51 Mustang escort fighter planes looking after us. Apparently, they had seen our plight and escorted us down from Graz and kept an eye on us. When we were about ½ hour out of Vis they rocked their wings to let us know they were thinking about us and then, they headed for home. It was nice to see that we had not really been alone.

The slowness of the plane caused the 290 miles from Graz to Vis to take 2 hours. The entire crew had their thoughts running through prayers as we endured the last ½ hour, while at the same time holding their respective breaths. We were getting lower and lower, each minute, descending at the rate of 100 ft. per minute. Floyd Hendershot, the navigator, kept us on the most direct course. As we got within 10 minutes of Vis, we decided that it would be "nip and tuck" to see if we could make it to the field, knowing that we could only make one approach. There was no response from the ground radio at Vis, until we were about 10 minutes out. They had a weak radio frequency, I guess. As we got within 5 minutes of the field, which was located about 1 mile from the seashore, we figured that we did not have enough altitude to play with, considering our rate of descent and speed, to make a safe approach to the field. There were these alternatives: hills, rough terrain, [and] water – the ocean.

So, there was only one feasible choice: land in the water. So, over the internal communication system, we called off the emergency procedure for a water landing to all of the crew members. None of us had ever landed on water. But, we all had [been] trained and instructed by people who had landed in the water. We all had memory of film that had been shown us to depict the situation. When you are in an emergency, all of the disciplines of your training come to the fore, in making decisions as to what to do.

With just 3 to 4 minutes left before we would be down, somewhere, I had to decide how to do it. Fortunately, the waves indicated the direction of the wind, which was light, at the water

level. We made a slight turn to the west, in order to head into the wind. There appeared to be no waves to speak of so that, if we did it right, we could expect a good, flat landing. We were heading parallel to the shore, about ½ mile out from shore. When we arrived at 100 ft. above the water, it became a case of making a consistent angle of approach, as the key to any good landing. Then with the wheels up, the flaps down, we slowed the plane down to 60 m.p.h. (The B-17 normally landed at 90 m.p.h.) We hoped to skim close to the water so that when the plane stopped flying (stalled out) we would fall smoothly and gently into the water.

It all went well. Then, following training instructions, just as the plane decided to "stall out" before hitting the water, we pulled the nose up, and—splash, bang, thud, thud, bang, we skimmed along like a stone being cast across the water. We finally skidded to a stop. It immediately appeared that the plane was in one piece, and floating. The co-pilot turned the engines and power switches off just as the plane hit the water. The next reaction was the seeping of water from all angles. Suddenly, the plane was converted to a "boat" and, since it was not designed as a boat, it was leaking.

It was immediately obvious that the 4 officers, up front, the two of us pilots and the bombardier and navigator under us, were okay, as all had been securely strapped to seats. So, we would be able to get out through the side windows in the cockpit and the small hatch-door, in the front. So, I rushed back through the bomb bay to determine the status of the 6 enlisted men. They were physically o.k.; but water had come in through the windows and open doors so fast that they were scrambling to get out, and becoming a little panicky since it was not obvious as to how they would get out before the plane filled with water. With the help of our 2nd pilot, Tom Kiefer, I dragged the tail gunner, Mark Youell, who appeared to be in the most precarious position, trying to squeeze his way up from the tail, and with a little push and shoving both of us got him out onto a wing. Then, I swam/sloshed my way back to get Elfren Gallego, our lower turret gunner, who was concerned that he could not swim, also a little banged up. I dragged him to the open door at the right, rear side of the plane and pushed him into

the water where Floyd Hendershot grabbed him and put him on the wing. The one other crewman that I helped was [Carl] Jones, the radio operator. He was where he had secured himself for the landing. With some quick heaving of equipment, we freed [Carl] up and got him through the open hatch and onto the wing. [Carl] was bedraggled but he quickly got his composure, once outside of the plane.

Within 10 minutes, everyone was outside the plane, on either side of the fuselage. Knowing that the plane was not designed to float, plus watching the water fill up the various apertures of the plane, we pulled the release cords to open the emergency hatches, housing yellow rafts, on either side of the fuselage over the wings. The two yellow rafts discharged from the openings and self-inflated with gas. Suddenly, we had boats to get into. This was exciting, heartwarming and security, all in one moment because, while we were only 1/8 mile from shore, we could not be sure how deep the water was. Then, we found a third raft release and got it out; so, we would have space for all 10 of us on rafts. We all did have life vests on. These were now part of our outer-wear, now that we had shed the parachutes which we had strapped to us all the time we were flying. However, we were not anxious to try out the life-vests in the cold, winter waters, especially with the other heavy things we had on, like boots, jackets, gun, etc. So, in a total of 15 minutes from the time we landed, we were in life rafts. In another 8 minutes, the plane gradually sank. We learned that it went into 25 feet of water.

By this time, there were people on the shore watching us. Then, 4 fishermen, in two rowboats showed up to offer assistance, and they towed us ashore. They were Yugoslavs and they were very kind and helpful, though they spoke no English. Vis was a small town and, the activity at the emergency field was the center of things during the war. About 15 minutes after we landed, a captain from the base came, in a Jeep, to greet us. We rode back to the field. After a brief discussion, they gave us some clothes, with the admonition to bring them back in the morning. Then, after writing up the details of our perilous trip, they "farmed" us

out, scattering us amongst 3 Yugoslav families where they had made arrangements for us to stay overnight. I believe that the crew at the base paid them money and gave them food. The whole situation at Vis—base, town, population, etc. was a very small and poverty stricken situation. The base was only a grass field with a miscellany of airplanes that had apparently ended up there for various reasons. They had a radio that was in contact with U.S. military authorities in Bari.

We received cordial, but sparse treatment in the homes where we stayed. We got our clothes dried by the fireplaces in these homes. The fireplaces were the only source of heat, although they did have wood-burning kitchen stoves for cooking. We got soup and bread, with jam, for dinner. We slept on bedrolls that the government had given these people. The next morning, they gave us some hot grain-type cereal and a roll. It was a pleasant experience visiting with these people, although most of it was to do with smiling at each other and gesturing. They were, obviously, pleased to have the Americans around. We each were given a 1-inch diameter star, red with a silver border, to pin on our hats. This was the symbol of the Yugoslav Partisan movement. The next day, at noon, an Air Transport Command DC-3 (pre-WWII type transport) picked us up, en route on their regular schedule to deliver supplies and other miscellaneous things as well as to pick up miscellaneous military personnel who had gotten "stranded." They flew us across the Adriatic to Bari, which ws headquarters for the 15th Air Force.

Then, we "hitched" a ride on another transport plane that was on its way to Foggia. They left us at our base. So, we arrived at our 97th Bomb Group base at the same time the planes arriving at the base from the day's mission were being debriefed. We sort of blended into the discussions with the intelligence officers, even though we were talking about the mission of the day before. Until we announced who we were and that we were from the mission of the day before, it did not seem that we had been missed. This was a bit disconcerting. However, at least the Red Cross ladies were sympathetic and made with the greetings and the "glad to see

you back" routine. Then, when we got back to our squadron, they were all glad to see us; and, they asked about our ordeal. By this time, we were in a jovial and thankful mood, some 24 hrs. after the trauma at Vis; so, we made light of it once we had given the details to the intelligence officers. Later, we learned that the plane was extracted from the water and set on its way to rehabilitation. Our crew never saw it again; as it was probably assigned elsewhere.

After this event, it seemed that our crew became more united than ever in spirit and in support of each other. There had developed a bond of trust that came without words because each had seen the help and care that was extended to each other, at Vis, etc. There was a form of gratification that came from the missions that succeeded. Otherwise, there were no medals or awards, just another event which was serious but, fortunately, not as critical as what confronted others, especially those who did not return from their missions. (G.H.N., 1991)[16]

In the Drink

Kevin Mahoney's 2015 book, *Bombing Europe: The Illustrated Exploits of the Fifteenth Air Force*, devoted a chapter to ditching in the sea named "In the Drink," bomber boy language for crash-landing a plane in water. The narrative and photography in this volume are unsurpassed. The author writes,

> The most dangerous hazard facing Fifteenth Air Force crews whose damaged aircraft managed to reach the Mediterranean or Adriatic Seas was bailing out of the stricken aircraft over the Mediterranean or Adriatic, with ditching in the sea a close second. The chances for survival after bailing out in these conditions were extremely low, while landing an aircraft in the water was almost as perilous. Many crews did not survive either.[17]

Of Mahoney's several accounts of sea ditching, some crew members perished in each case. Notwithstanding, the B-17 again

performed better than the Liberator. One factor was that the B-24 fuselage is located below the wings, whereas it is above the wings on the Fortress. This helped distribute the shock of a water landing, improving the chances of surviving for the crew.[18]

The island of Vis, thirty-five square miles, belonged to the Dalmatian Island group off the Yugoslavian Coast (present day Croatia). It was the only Yugoslav territory not under Nazi control. The British occupied the island in early 1944. In the summer of 1944, it was the location of Tito's partisan headquarters. The island was an armed camp with some ten thousand partisan and seven hundred British and American commandos as well as a safe landing zone for numerous crippled Allied aircraft returning from missions over the continent.[19] Among the numerous airmen who credit Vis for saving their lives was my father-in-law, B-24 navigator Lt. Floyd Haupt of the 464th BG, 55th BW, Foggia. Returning from a July 8, 1944 mission to Vienna, he and his crew bailed out over the island due to lack of fuel. Sixty seconds later, the plane ran out of fuel and crashed on the south shore of the island. The fliers made it back to their base at Pantanella Air Field in Italy three days later.[20]

Well, today, I resumed my activities after returning from my visit with Bob. We went to Austria + hit the Graz (Gratz) railroad marshalling yards which are on the main lines between Vienna + northern Italy. We flew over the clouds for a change, today! We used to always have clouds beneath us; but it is now not such an ordinary case, because the weather over the continent is becoming better + better. Anyhow, it was a long trip, not in distance but because they took so long to get there. I now have 19 trips over the target (30 missions) + I have 16 more trips to go! (3/9/45)

This scanty and superficial account of the epic Vienna-Graz mission is juxtaposed against the lengthy and detailed narrative in George's later memoirs. The discrepancy is wanting of an explanation but only theories can be offered. One is that George, knowing how distressing Bob's situation was to Ma, wanted to spare her of learning of his close call with death. Another possibility

is that there was a security issue with releasing information about the sea landing.

(See Appendix I-19)

Here's a funny story about Bob! While we rehearsed everything, he told me about a dream he had, while setting in his sick bed! As sick as he was, he was so wrapped up + so worked up over his work that he dreamed about his company. He told me that his dream was about meeting the company outside the hospital. He was to meet them out beside the house + talk over the next problem, at 8:00 p.m. The nurse said that he even tried to get out of bed, before he realized that something was wrong. Of course, that didn't do his injury any good; but, that's another story.

I have recounted my experiences "at the front" to everyone in the squadron; and, they all took it with their mouths hanging open. Everyone is thoroughly convinced that the infantry has physical woes, while ours are almost entirely mental. The morale of the infantry soldier at the front is a little more than marvelous, while air crews are more reserved + live in fear of their troubles! The infantry soldier lives amidst the mental worry so much that it becomes secondary to his physical hardships. In other words, the infantry has less psycho-neurotics than we do!!

P.S. Bob had better care in that Italian farmhouse than he'd get at the Mass. General Hospital – honestly!!! (3/9/45)

"Captain Neilson is doing very, very well"

It is now ten minutes 'til eleven + I've just hung up on the phone after calling Bob. It took me exactly 2 minutes to get my call through 7 G.I. telephone exchanges + get to the field hospital where Bob is!! That's what I call miraculous, through the squadron, the Group, the Wing, Foggia, Naples, Florence, etc. all in 2 minutes! First, I talked with one of the enlisted men, I presume, who said, "Captain Neilson is doing very, very well." Then, I talked with Mary-Ellen Reilley who said that Bob is doing well + improving very nicely. Then, I told her to tell Bob that I called! Mary said that she'd call here as soon as she got orders that Bob was moved. You can rest assured that I shall do all I can to get all the details

about Bob for you. And, I'm sure that Mary-Ellen Reilley will do all she can to provide me with the information!

Today, Kiefer + I flew on a practice bombing mission, to the Mediterranean coast of southern Italy; however we got to altitude only to find that there was a total undercast, so we couldn't see the ground. However, we did get a good look at the massive vineyards of southern Italy when we came home, for we came back at tree-top level. It seems like all of Italy from the base down to the toe + the heel is nothing more than a continuous series of vineyards + orchards. Then, from here up to the Po Valley, it is nothing but a solid mass of hills + mountains. (3/10/45)

Far from the hostile skies and the deep mud of the Fifteenth Air Force, George in a letter to Betty sought some assistance in her role as his consultant on things female.

I only value her friendship from the viewpoint of the young fellow who is starved for female companionship! Betty, I implore you to stick with me + help me find someone who I can at least be friends with. I'd rather be struck dead than not abide by your wishes or suggestions. Little George will come through for you, Betty, honestly. But please tell me who to write to. (3/10/45)

There has been only one thing that has been bothering me about Bob; and, that was cleared up by our squadron flight surgeon, this evening! They told me that they move the patients to the general hospitals, as soon as possible, because they need room so badly. They only keep those who can't be safely evacuated, at the field hospitals. I was wondering why Bob hadn't been moved, as long as he was doing well. The flight surgeon says that in the case of a "colostomy," they don't move them until the patient is very stable + feels strong. When I told the flight surgeon how long Bob had been injured, it was his opinion that Bob was undoubtedly doing well, because, "if a colostomy goes that far, it is probably okay." It is in the early phase that it is worrisome.

To begin with, three of the surgeons came from Boston

Now, I must tell you that Bob had quite a few friends to talk with, at the hospital. To begin with, 3 of the surgeons came from Boston. One was Lt. Col. Beecham, from Commonwealth Ave. + Milton + Myopia (do tell). He is a research surgeon + definitely a Harvard man! The second was a Captain Giddings, from Newton Center. He is a fine, young doctor who performed an operation similar to Bob's, for me! The third man's name was Gabriel, I believe! He used to live on Harvard Avenue. I am not certain but I believe he claims to know Betty + Junior!! He knew Bob, too. Anyhow, he was in West Medford while we were growing up. Perhaps you remember him. Anyhow, he and Bob talked over old times! Then, Bob was accompanied by another Captain from the same regiment, who has a similar injury.

Last night, Mary said he [Bob] was doing fine. You see, they can't risk bringing him over that rough highway, because an abdominal injury is easy to injure more, that way.

I guess I didn't tell you that I've seen the whole inside of the human body, while it lives! While I was up at that field hospital, I witnessed, right over the doctor's shoulder, every conceivable type of gruesome operation! I saw every one of the inner organs, except the head. Because, they don't handle head injuries in the field hospitals! I bet I could say that nothing could be more distasteful than what I saw in one night's operations. Yet, I had a feeling of curiosity, not fear, during the entire proceedings. (3/11/45)

Finally, I received two letters from Mary-Ellen Reilley, the nurse which had written about a week after Bob was hurt, + which should have come much sooner! Mind you, the only way she knew where I was, was because she became friends with a fellow who is in another squadron in our group. She writes to him very often! I never heard from her, 'til now, since we got off the boat. This boy whom she knows – "Whitey" Lykins, is planning to marry her + vice-versa, back in the states. (3/13/45)

Today, we had a strenuous period of P.T. in the morning; so, I'm a little stiff because of the novelty of it all. Now that the weather has improved, we are going to have physical training + calisthenics, just like we had it in training. I think it's a good idea; but, it is hard getting started again. One of the "walkie-talkies" is in charge of the P.T., one of the officers who is a "typewriter-pilot."

They woke me up in the middle of it all + stuck an egg sandwich in my face

Last night, Foster + 2 other navigators had a finger in planning the details of today's mission, at group headquarters; so, Foster dragged them back to the tent at 1:00 a.m. + started frying eggs + toasting bread. Then, the stove clogged up + we had to clean out the smoke stack. So, they were making egg sandwiches up until 3:00 a.m. Of course, they woke me up in the middle of it all + stuck an egg sandwich in my face. It, naturally, went down like a lead brick.

I guess that I didn't tell you that we have a new C.O., Col Jasper, who replaces Col. Shafer who completed his tour of duty. Col. Jasper is a West Pointer who has been in the Group for some time. Of course he only flies once in every week or two, because of his duties. Well, I'm going to fly tomorrow; so, I'll close now. (3/14/45)

Prior to March 15, 1945, Berlin had been bombed by the Eighth Air Force out of England, some 550 miles from the bases in East Anglia. The city was pummeled by 350 bombing attacks for a year prior to March 15. Perhaps to throw off the Luftwaffe and to lighten the load of the Eighth, the Fifteenth began flying huge fleets of planes deep into eastern Germany, in the vicinity of Berlin. The mission on March 15 that struck oil and transportation targets in the Berlin hinterland was the Fifteenth's deepest penetration of the war. Berlin was eight hundred miles from Foggia, near the edge of the range of the heavy bombers.[21]

MISSION #20 – SCHWARZHEIDE, GERMANY/KOLIN, CZECHOSLOVAKIA – MARCH 15

By March 15, the war in Europe was beginning to come to its closing events. Schwarzheide is next to Ruhland, a suburb of Berlin, a long, long way from Foggia. Up until this occasion, all the strategic bombing missions to Berlin and northern Germany were flown from England, by the 8th Air Force. Apparently, the folks at the high command decided to put an exclamation point on

Berlin, by sending the 15th Air Force up from Italy. The target was the Ruhland Oil Refinery, right next to the headquarters of the Daimler-Benz Corp., makers of tanks for Hitler as well as Daimler and Mercedes-Benz automobiles.

The weather was perfect. There was no wind and there was not expected to be much, if any, enemy resistance through the itinerary of the mission. We were not loaded heavily with bombs, only six 500 lb. bombs. But, the planes were filled to capacity, and topped-off with fuel. The briefing made it clear that probably the primary challenge would be fuel conservation. To make a round-trip of 1600 miles with the B-17G would be stretching the range to the last pint of fuel.

We climbed, using "low-pitch" of the propeller blades and with lean fuel mixture, in order to conserve fuel. This would enable us to use less manifold pressure with the throttles. We climbed "gradually," meaning that we climbed "through" the Alps, almost touching some of the peaks, because we were trying to conserve fuel. We got a little sight-seeing in: Mt. Blanc, the Aigue, the Grindelwald, etc., as we crossed near Switzerland. We did not get to our assigned altitude until we were in central Germany. There were a large number of escort fighter planes assigned to watch out for us, en route.

Travelling at slightly slower speed and climbing more gradually, it seemed to take forever to get to the target area. We got to the Ruhland Oil Refinery and dropped our bombs. There was no opposition, and, as we turned to leave the target area, there was a little thrill – to see the city of Berlin off to our right, as we headed south. It seemed like a scenic tour: clear skies [and] lots of planes as it was a maximum effort involving a majority of the B-17s and B-24s of the 15th Air Force.

One of the distinctively interesting parts of this mission was the performance of the *332nd Fighter Group, out of Cerignola, Italy (near our base). This was the only contingent of Black airmen (they called them *Colored*, in those days), in the Air Force. The blacks had been carefully picked and well trained; and, they performed well on the daily routines of defending the bombers.

However, they were the subject of regular racial slurs, on a daily basis because there was considerable prejudice in the military throughout the war. The arguments pertaining to the reasons for the Civil War were a daily occurrence when whites met with blacks. On the occasion of the trip to Berlin, the 332nd Fighter Group was assigned to target cover for the distant Schwarzheide target. This meant that they had to be in the target area for about 30 minutes. Top begin with, to travel the 8 hours directly to the target (900 miles), even with **auxiliary wing tanks, with the expectation of returning to base, seemed impossible. Then, to have to put in the target-cover time meant that, certainly, most of the planes would not have enough fuel to get back to Cerignola. Most of them did not get back to their base. So it was strange that they would be scheduled for such a mission. As it worked out, they all returned safely by finding friendly fields to land on, mostly in northern Italy. The challenge for the fighters assigned to fly en route-coverage was also a large one, considering the fuel economy requirements; and again, it was a comparable problem for the fighters assigned to go to the target for the purpose of escorting the bombers back to base. As far as we ever heard, there were no catastrophes connected with this mission, especially to do with the fighter escorts. (G.H.N., 1991)[22]

*The 332nd Fighter Group was in fact based at Ramitelli AB, Italy. The unit was part of the 306th Fighter Wing. The highly decorated 332nd was also known as the *Red Tails* and *The Tuskegee Airmen*, the latter a name taken from their training base in Alabama.[23]

**Auxiliary wing tanks were also known as drop tanks or Tokyo tanks. They extended the range of the fighters and were jettisoned when they were empty.[24]

At briefing, everyone wise-cracked about how we'd meet in Yugo, tonight, for it seemed certain that we'd not get home

Today, I was on another exciting + unusual mission. Today's affair was one of the 15th's greatest efforts, ever. The object was to attack the remaining oil refineries in central Germany which are providing the

fast dwindling supply of fuel for the Wehrmacht! All the targets were in central + north-eastern Germany; and, of course, the B-17s were sent to the longest + most important of them all!

Now that Brux, Blechhammer, + Moosbierbaum have been reduced, one of the principal refineries is now Schwarzheide, located in the 8th Air Force range, considerably beyond our long-range radius. For some reason, they sent us to this place, today, instead of the 8th! Schwarzheide is located about 40 miles east of Leipzig + only 50 miles south of Berlin! The longest target I have ever been to was Brux, up until today. But, Schwarzheide is about 90 miles north of Brux. We almost fell over when they mentioned that at briefing! For, on previous occasions, many planes could not get back from Brux, because of a lack of fuel; and here, they're sending us 100 miles farther! At briefing, everyone wise-cracked about how we'd meet in Yugo, tonight, for it seemed certain that we'd not get home! (It turned out that they didn't expect so many back either. It was supposed to be one of those raids, when they were out after a target, regardless.

There's plenty of anxiety when 3 planes take off side-by-side on 3 runways, into the fog

To begin with, we had to take off with a dense fog covering the area; and you couldn't see the length of the runway; and as soon as we were in the air, we had to wait until we reached 1000 feet before we could see any of the other planes. On top of that, we had planes taking off from 3 separate, parallel runways, in order that everyone might get in the air as quickly as possible. Believe me, there's plenty of anxiety when 3 planes take off side-by-side on 3 runways, into the fog! But, that's combat!

We didn't waste the usual time in rendezvousing! As soon as each squadron + group was organized above the overcast, we were off on our merry way across Lake Lesina, behind the spur + out over the Adriatic. Because of the long haul, we climbed slowly so that we'd not pull excessive power + use too much gasoline. So, we passed over Yugoslavia at only 5,000 feet + barely skimmed the cloud covered Alps! (Ordinarily, we are high over the Alps.)

Because we were expected to encounter heavy fighter opposition, for the first time since last fall, they had every available fighter plane in the 15th Provisional Fighter Command to escort the Air Force in to the various targets beyond the Alps: some 450 P-51s + P-38s were in the skies of Germany, from Italy. The most we ever had before was about 150. But, they were expecting some of the bomber waves to be intercepted; and, they wanted to be there.

It was the longest mission that the B-17s from Italy have ever performed

For us, it was the longest mission that the B-17s from Italy have ever performed. In order to reach Schwarzheide, we had to go straight by Austria, in sight of Vienna, all the way across Czechoslovakia + up into the so-called "fighter belt" of the Leipzig-Dresden area. It is up at Leipzig that the Luftwaffe is capable of putting up over 250 fighters. It is in that area that the major air battles are fought, when the Luftwaffe decides to come up! To reach the target, we passed near Vienna, almost over Prague, close to Brux, right by Dresden to within 40 miles of Leipzig and 50 miles of Berlin. That's what I call a Cook's Tour of Europe! When we got up there, it was 3:00! Imagine, 3:00 in the afternoon + over 700 miles from home. As it happened, when the 97th got there, the target had been hit + was burning, so we passed over it (+ the consequential anti-aircraft fire) + went to an alternate target, some 40 miles to the southeast. We dropped our bombs on this *Kolin oil refinery + were able to see the smoke + fire, when we were on the way home, all the way from the Danube River in Austria! Then, we passed over 2 targets in this epochal, long distance operation: two of the 8th Air Force's heavy targets. Yet nobody was badly hit!

For some strange reason, we didn't see much of our fighter escort in the target area. We almost felt like we had been deserted. It seems that the fighters must have encountered the Luftwaffe in a big battle. However, we won't know 'til tomorrow. But, there is a strong rumor about that the Germans came up + got what they were looking for!

Anyhow, I got a bird's eye view of both Dresden + Leipzig + might have seen Berlin, if the weather had been clearer! I don't expect to ever get

any closer to Berlin than I was today, for we were far out of our maximum radius of operations. We were actually up in the 8th Air Force's zone of operation!

The last rays of the sun were just about to sink below the horizon, when we neared the field

The trip back was uneventful. We saw a lot of enemy activity in the Danube, between Linz + Vienna: a lot of barges doing something or other. When we got below the Alps, we had to fly through a lot of cirrus clouds + haze; but, our main worry was the weather at the base. We hoped that we'd not have to land in the fog. That would be very hazardous, if not impossible! We were so anxious about that, that we had the radio man start getting weather reports as soon as we came off the target! When we finally came across the Adriatic + over the spur into Italy, the weather was clear, but hazy, and our main worry was darkness. For the last rays of the sun were just about to sink below the horizon, when we neared the field; and, it was nearly dark before our landing roll was finished, the longest mission I ever was on or the 97th either!!

Today's mission was a tribute to headquarters + the colonel who led us. For, not an item was overlooked in the planning! We never wasted a minute in making a rendezvous; and all the check points + altitudes were schemed so that we never overworked our engines or used excessive gas. As a result, we came back with about 700 gallons of gas in our particular plane. It was almost unbelievable. We would [have] had enough gas to carry our bombs to Berlin, today, very, very unusual.

Why, sometimes we pull so much power to get even to Vienna that we came back with only 200 gallons, or so! Yes, it was a very remarkable trip in many ways. It was long, it brought us close to some more of Europe's great cities, we hit a good target + we enjoyed the benefits of an easy-on-the-airplane flight plan. It overshadowed my Christmas day trip to Brux, very definitely.

We dared the Luftwaffe by steering a course directly through the middle of their kingdom

I was more than a little puzzled when I found that the intelligence dept. had not expected 1/3 of us to return because of the length of the trip + the vulnerability of the plan to possible fighter opposition. We could have been hit at Vienna, at Prague or at Leipzig. In other words, we dared the Luftwaffe by steering a course directly through the middle of their kingdom! I'll let you know how much of a hand the fighters had in protecting us. It was probably very important to give you an idea of what the Luftwaffe is now up against. Yesterday's mission is an example. It so happened, that the heavies bombed a rail yard in the vicinity of the Russian lines in Austria, yesterday. At the same time, Russian "Yak" fighters were operating in support of their ground troops, when they were jumped by 20 Messerschmitts. At the same time, the American escort fighters arrived on the scene. Within 20 minutes, 20 MEs were contending with 50 P-51s + 19 of the 20 German planes were destroyed. Imagine how German pilots must feel when they are sent up to contest such overwhelming numbers of our planes! Often times, we see them playing hide + seek in the Alps, staying out of our way, yet performing one of their "missions."

Oh yes, we weren't far from Breslau, on the way home today, either. I'll bet the Krauts were surprised to see our planes that far up into Germany, today!! They were probably no little annoyed to discover that the 15th Air Force could come that far!

Oh yes, I got a long letter from Kay, asking for details that I have already sent about Bob! She wrote me many nice things about how she loves Bob + would even consent to live in Texas, to be with him! She has no doubt that she'll not spend her married life in New England! Says she couldn't talk Bob into the Pacific. (3/15/45)

*Czechoslovakia

Bob and Kay spent their married lives in the Houston area.

(See Appendix I-20)

The U.S. armed forces newspaper *Stars and Stripes*[25] reported of the March 15th mission,

15th Blasts Biggest Nazi Oil Refinery: Forts Hit 75 Miles from Berlin on Record Mission

MAAF HQ, Mar. 15

Flying Fortresses of the 15th Air Force struck deep into Germany today to attack the huge synthetic oil plant at Ruhland, 75 miles south of Berlin and 30 miles north of Dresden. It was the longest mission ever flown from Italian bases.

The Mustang-escorted Fortresses flew more than 700 miles to blast the great refinery – the largest still available to the German war machine. The target was only 37 miles from Russian lines along the Neisse River. Good results were reported by returning crewmen who said that smoke billowed 20,000 feet over the objective.

The Ruhland plant has been producing 18 percent of the enemy's gasoline supply.

Other Fortresses attacked a crude oil refinery at Kolin, Czechoslovakia, 35 miles east of Prague.

Since we have a great number of crews in the squadron, we don't fly every day or anywhere near that often. However, there is a mission scheduled practically every day, now. The situation is quite changed from the way it was in February + January. Now, it is quite the unusual situation when they don't fly! For example, they went to Vienna, today, but an entirely different bunch of fellows flew than what flew on the previous, long mission.

This morning, I attended a very interesting lecture on the use of radar in anti-aircraft + anti-aircraft jamming procedures. It is evident that they work night + day in an attempt to devise methods of fooling the German gunners. That at least helps a fellow's morale several hundred percent!

I have been spending some time lately, in visiting fellows on crews that came over with us who are stationed at other squadrons in the group. I guess that we all live with practically the same degree of comfort. All the crews seem to stick together + live as families in their own particular tents.

Tonight, I intended to write a lengthy letter but the fellows in the next tent brought in a dozen eggs + we had an egg sandwich + tomato juice party! (3/16/45)

I received your letter of March 10, yesterday, along with one from Junior + one from Eddie who is still in the Marianas Islands. Eddie says that the capture of Iwo Jima means a lot to the fellows in the Marianas who have been subject to recent attacks from the Japs! Iwo Jima is the only place between Saipan + Japan from which the Japs could possibly operate.

P.S. I forgot to mention that we had a formal inspection by the C.O. yesterday. This place is getting more + more like a training base. Every day we have P.T., inspections + what not!!! (3/18/45)

One of the most frustrating things in the military is when one has moved on to a lower level of harassment (formally called military protocol) and then some new brass comes along and decides it is time to shape up the ship. It makes one feel like he is back in basic training again, and is very discouraging. It seems like an insult to make men play these games who have been in combat and understand the importance and the place for discipline when it really counts.

It is all the "typewriter pilots" and rear echelon office workers who are griping

Well, another day has come + gone, and, I can't see that I did much to further the cause of democracy, today! However, I get a great boost out of reading "Mail Call" in the Stars + Stripes. It seems like it is all the "typewriter pilots" + rear echelon office workers who are griping + complaining + getting afraid that they won't get what's coming them, when it's over!

It is getting so that the fellows in the squadron are getting disgusted with the magazine. All it seems to do is present the wails + woes of fellows who have no idea what war is like! All we can do, here in the squadron, is sit back + think, "If those poor saps only knew what it was all about!"

Ma, everyone who "thinks" he has trouble should be made to see the scene I witnessed at that Italian farmhouse on Highway "64!" I believe, honestly, that such a scene would terrify, say nothing of sicken, any fellow who had been cringing + bellyaching from his rear-echelon position! Isn't it a shame when you stop + think what fellows like Bob have gone through! (3/19/45)

Prompted by a tidbit George picked up in a letter from someone in Medford regarding an old flame, he suddenly launched into his entire courtship history going all the way back to eighth grade, rehearsing the names of the girls he had gone on dates with in high school and the excessive degree of scheming that he did in order to go on these outings without his mother's knowledge. He had commissioned third parties with cars and drivers' licenses to provide transportation. It appeared to be a tell-all spiel, far more interesting to some than the operation of a turbo-supercharger or the radio navigation of a bomber.

I used to sit + scheme, scheme + scheme on how I might ask her out without you folks knowing, the whole idea being that I realized how you considered me too young to be going out with girls. I'll bet I could write a book on the scheming that I did just to take her out once! I don't know how much you know about it, but I think the only time I "formally" advised you that I was taking her out was when I asked her to the Junior Prom. (3/19/45)

Shocking, scandalous revelations.

MISSION #21 – VIENNA – MARCH 20

On March 20, we went along with a large contingent of both B-17s and B-24s, to the Korneuburg Oil Refinery, another synthetic oil refinery located south and east of Vienna. This time, we [were] able to avoid traveling across the city, as we came in from the southwest, flying at 26,000 ft., as well as being in the lead plane in the #2 squadron of a 4-squadron group. We hit the target squarely,

apparently finishing it off for the balance of the war, which turned out to be a month away.

It is worthy of note that during the time I was in the war, all of the oil available to Hitler's war machine came from man-made, or synthetic sources. The biggest natural resource of oil in Europe, the Ploesti Oil Fields in Romania, were finished off as vital targets just before our crew arrived in Italy, in October, 1944.

On this mission, 3 of the planes in our Group did not return: two were seen to have their crew parachute out, while the third plane apparently landed in enemy territory, near Vienna. Our plane suffered a hit in the #2 engine, resulting in a fire with lots of smoke. Oil creates black smoke as it burns. Fortunately, we were able to put the fire out by using the CO_2 system on the engine. We then returned to base satisfactorily, along with the formation, using just three engines. A fire in an airplane engine is always a very scary situation. Failure to eliminate the fire could lead to instant disaster, especially if the fire gets to the fuel system. A trip to Vienna always provided something to worry about, it seems. (G.H.N., 1991)[26]

Instead of setting fire to an oil refinery, we blew up a bunch of boxcars

Today, Kiefer + I flew the lead ship in our squadron! That is the first time we have flown that positon; and, it indicates, at least, that we are capable of flying a lead position. They don't ordinarily let just anyone fly in squadron lead!

Anyhow, we went to the big city, the target which corresponds to Berlin, in the 8th Air Force, dear old Vienna! Yes, Vienna is the place where the woods are full of guns. For me, it was the third trip to the Vienna area. Today, our target was one of the oil refineries which surround the city itself + one of which there are only a few remaining. Our target was the Korneuburg refinery which is north of the city itself, on the other side of the Danube River! We came over the target from the north; and, since the bombardier was not able to see the target completely, we could not drop the bombs, the group lead bombardier, that is. There is nothing more disheartening than to go over a target in the Vienna area + not being

able to let loose the load of bombs because of some sort of a technicality. If it's not a malfunction on the lead ship; then, it's clouds obscuring a visual target.

Anyhow, the group went over an alternate target, the Amstetten rail yards, which lies between Linz and Vienna on the edge of the Danube. Going over two targets, or one target twice, is a nerve-wracking procedure, when you stop + think of how just any one target stimulates your thinking! So, instead of setting fire to an oil refinery, we blew up a bunch of boxcars on one of the way stations in the Linz-Vienna communication line!

It is tiresome and nerve-wracking watching those needles

Today, we had a lot of bad weather to contend with, and, we had to battle cirrus clouds over the Alps, both in penetration and withdrawal! Twice we got "lost" in the soup; and, Kiefer + I had to fly on instruments 'til we got the squadron out of the weather. There is quite a responsibility when you realize that there are 6 planes following you through a solid wall of clouds, depending on your ability to fly on instruments, to bring them out on top without hitting another squadron! We managed to get through the clouds on both occasions, still keeping our planes in formation! It was another one of those days when everybody was flying through the clouds; and, it is tiresome + nerve-wracking watching those needles!

You know, it wasn't so long ago when it was quite a feat to fly on instruments alone! Now, the Air Force asks you to fly blind, with 6 ships flying on your wings! Quite a bit of responsibility. If we had slipped + got Vertigo, today, 7 planes could have easily crashed into the mountains. Maybe such a responsibility doesn't force you to great efforts, too! (3/20/45)

(See Appendix I-21)

Two days later, on March 22, the Fifteenth attacked Ruhland (south of Berlin) and encountered Me262 jet fighters in strength. Led by two-hundred-kill ace Theodor Weissenberget, twenty-seven jets (*Schwalbe*, swallows in English, as the plane was

named), flew right through the flak field and the Mustangs, downing seven Forts.

> Staff Sergeant Alfred Novak said, "I saw B-17 number 440 attacked by an Me262 which came in from six o-clock low, firing 20 mm [sic]. It received a direct hit between No. 1 and No. 2 engines and caught fire. The aircraft appeared out of control and in a roll. The wing then fell off and the aircraft continued in a dive. I couldn't follow it all the way to the ground because of fighter attacks. I observed no parachutes" Only the tail gunner survived.[27]

The next day, seven Liberators of the 463rd BG were lost at the Saint-Valentine tank factory, fifteen miles north of Linz, Austria.[28]

In a letter apparently written subsequent to the March 20 mission to Vienna, George gave a summary of the Fifteenth targets and missions to the second great Nazi capital. He mentioned the spread-out nature of the city and its many prime targets, including the oil refineries of Florisdorf, Karlan, Korneuburg, Lubau, Winter Haven (Winterhafen), and Moosbierbaum as well as the other strategic targets in the middle of the city, including the South Goods Depot, Main Station, Ordnance Depot, and the Southeast Marshalling Yards. Ostensibly desiring to dispel talk about terror bombing, George explained,

> I suppose that many people believe that when they read about Berlin or Vienna being bombed, the planes aimed at any part of the city. Well, that is not true. They always had a specific target, as if the target was alone in the woods. Of course, there's another side of the story, too! When they bombed through clouds, it was not always accurate + if the target was in a thickly populated area + the bombs missed---well, you can guess the rest! One day, at Vienna, I saw several misunderstandings occur during an instrument bomb run (non-visual) + bombs fell haphazardly all over the town! That's how cities get destroyed! (3/20/45)

Regarding the geographical distribution of Fifteenth AF casualties, Tillman[29] wrote:

> The most dangerous territory for the airmen of the Fifteenth was Austria, where almost one-quarter of their casualties occurred. Next was Italy (18 percent), Germany (14 percent), and Yugoslavia (13 percent). The Fifteenth was busiest, on the other hand, over Italy, where it dropped 30 percent of its ordnance, followed by Austria (24 percent) and Germany (12 percent). The airmen were able to drop more ordnance with fewer casualties over Italy thanks to the lower threat in Italian skies.

RECONDITIONED ENGINES

My tour of duty was late in the war. At this point, there were B-17s and B-24s flying all over the world in the various theaters of combat operations. As a result, the planes got worked hard. On many flights, it was not possible to run the engines within the "normal" settings published by the engine manufacturer (Wright Aircraft). It was often necessary to use extraordinary power settings to keep up with the schedules or to overcome a deficiency such as other engines being out of order. Between normal, hard use and the extraordinary circumstances, there was a constant, nightly program of replacing engines on the planes. In turn, the engines were sent back to the United States, to their manufacturers and others, to be re-worked and brought back to their original strength, or at least as close as possible.

So, while we were in Italy, a common daily conversation had to do with the ineffectiveness and lack of ability to perform of the reconditioned engines that eventually got put on the planes we flew. You can tell a lot about the performance of the engines by listening to them whine. So, it was possible to tell the difference between the reconditioned engines and the original ones. Frankly we spent a lot of time worrying whether the engines would hold

up, as we made our way to the targets with the engines at "full throttle." During my tour of duty, the crew experienced 5 engine failures in addition to the ones which were caught on fire. But, we never knew the difference between "new" and "reconditioned" when these events occurred. (G.H.N., 1991)[30]

I got your long letter telling about Aunt Kate's visit, Otto's troubles, the ice-chest, the washing machine, etc. It looks like everyone is having troubles, doesn't it? However, I shall say that, as combat goes, I have nothing to say that might add to the confusion. In other words, things seem to be going along just about normally!

Today, I received the package with the big, new kind of fruitcake, the sardines, raisins + deviled ham, not to mention that vital item, the Ping-Pong ball. Everything arrived in very fine shape, thank you! This evening, Foster + Dunn both took rather large samples of the cake; and they voiced thorough approval. There's still half of it left for tomorrow night, although we had quite a "raid" on it, tonight.

Foster + Dunn want to thank you for the nice cake, as they stand licking their chops. (3/21/45)

There really is something artistic and beautiful about such old Italian architecture, narrow streets and the horse-buggies with the straw hats on the horses

Kiefer has run across a new fad all his own, these days. You can look for him anytime during the course of the day + find him cutting out pictures of the cute little baby-girls that appear in magazines like Coronet! Then, he pins them up in the tent, like many of the boys put up their "pin-up" girls. Some of them are really pretty little girls, and I'd say they are much more attractive than the ordinary pin-up girls.

I received a letter, on the back of an Easter card, from Kay today. She is evidently convinced that Bob is okay! I am convinced of that, but he'll be a long time convalescing. The only question in my mind is how long it will be before they decide to send him home! However, I have had no word from or about him; so, I assume that he is coming along okay!

As far as the war is concerned, these days, most of the oil refineries are out of operation, entirely; and, the only refineries the Germans have are badly damaged + not producing much! That is a very good sign, even greater than some of the advances the front lines have been making. For, as long as every gallon of German fuel is accounted for, they have an idea about how the war is progressing! The Germans have built all kinds of airplanes + have them ready to fly! All they need is the gasoline so that they can train the pilots + put the planes into the air. There is still no excitement, or reason for excitement, about when the war will end! I will go so far as to say that it should end by the end of this year, in the normal course of events. Everyone is still looking for that surprise collapse, though. (3/22/45)

This is entirely in line with history. The Germans were pouring planes out of factories late in the war, many of them built in forests under cover. Some five thousand fighters alone were constructed in 1945.[31] But fuel and pilots to fly the planes were scarce. Fuel was even diverted from pilot training schools, so that some green Luftwaffe pilots were being put in the air with just thirty hours of training to scramble with US pilots who had had three to four hundred hours of training in addition to lots of combat experience. These Luftwaffe pilots were unlikely to last three weeks, according to Miller.[32] It was simply murder to put those men up to fight the Allied fleets. One exception was the jet, which received priority and was flown by aces. However, the Swallows had their own problems, and the Allied fighters soon figured out how to take them down. Their speed was actually a disadvantage when tangling with conventional aircraft. Many of them crashed while not in combat. It was the last Nazi miracle weapon, but it was too little, too late. Near the end of the war, one in every three or four pilots would be replaced every week. It was not long before the German cadre of jet pilots was depleted, along with practically everything else in the arsenal. No Me262 planes survived the war intact, but their carcasses were intensely studied by Allied air personnel after the surrender.[33]

I hope that they fly him the heck out of here

Today, the big news I received was that Bob has been transferred to the 70th General Hospital! I received a terse note from Mary Reilley, to the effect that Bob was moved. Now, the letter was postmarked March 17; so, I assume that he was moved on March 17. All she said was that he has to be transferred! The 70th General Hospital is in the town of Pistoia, which lies a little outside of Florence. It is the hospital to which the 32nd Field Hospital ordinarily evacuates its patients.

Bob will more than likely be there for quite a while, unless they send him out on a hospital ship or plane. I hope that they fly him the heck out of here! We are about 7 days apart, by mail, strange as it may seem. But, if you could see the roads + Eyetie trains, you'd probably see why!

Now, don't get worried, for I was not on the raid when you probably read about the 15th losing so many planes (March 22). They went to the same target that I went to last Saturday, that long haul up to the Leipzig area. They got hit by those famous jet-propelled fighters which the Germans boast of! None of our group's planes were hit! (3/23/45)

The same day, George wrote a letter to his brother, Bob, at the 70th General Hospital.

Dear Bob,

Well, how are you? That's the foolishest question I could ask, just about, isn't it? Since I saw you last, I have written detailed letters to each of the concerned parties: Ma + Kay. I wrote twice to Kay + I also wrote a couple of times to Junior. Kay wrote as if she were just hoping + praying and more or less trusting to God that you were okay. She said that at least she could gather some consolation from the fact that you were not fighting anymore!

When I got back, I told the boys how rough it was up "at the front," and everyone conceded that it must really be rough up there. When I told them about all the casualties at that field hospital, etc., they stood gawking with their mouths hanging open! Yes, Bob, I shall never forget that vivid scene of war, believe me!

Let me know if there's anything I can get you or do for you, now! In the meantime, all the boys here ask for you, every day; and, I pray for your speedy recovery, each time I go to church! Best wishes + know that I think about you all day long. George. (3/24/45a)

Congresswoman Rep. Clare Booth Luce, no less, attended briefing at 5:30 a.m.

Well, I missed being on another storybook + history making milestone in the annals of the 15th Air Force, today! This was the greatest achievement of all the performances that B-17s have ever performed! Not only that, it had a touch of glamour which one generally only associates with the "glorious" 8th Air Force, the fellows who miss all the targets + get all the newspaper write-ups.

It all began this morning, as the story goes, when *Congresswoman Rep. Clare Booth Luce no less, attended briefing at 5:30 a.m. with the 97th Bomb Group. Naturally, since she's here, she'd offer to visit the oldest + most publicized of the groups! But, on top of all that, the target they had for the boys was none other than Berlin. Never before had they conceived of flying from Foggia to Berlin + back, with a load of bombs. But, on the basis of the trip to Ruhland, they decided it feasible. So, of course, Mrs. Luce had to be coincidentally on hand when they briefed for such an unusual mission. They say that Col. Ohman announced it with the glamour which you see in the movies, "Something you're waiting for," and they all cheered. So, keep an eye out for Mrs. Luce's commentary. The 15th Air Force will finally get its just play + maybe you'll hear about the 97th!

Anyway, the boys traveled up 800 miles + hit a tank factory in the southern part of the city. They said that the weather was clear + they saw the big Olympic Stadium in the center of the city, the big main drag the Wilhelmstrasse and the famed **"Under den Linden." Everyone said that they were thrilled beyond words to go over Berlin, despite the long, long, mission + the dangers they had to go through to get there. They are all raving, still about seeing Berlin! I kind of wish that I had been on it, too. But, it wasn't my turn to fly. You'd think that they had been to a carnival to see the boys howling + laughing, tonight!

They flew 100 miles further than even Ruhland, which was a record trip, last week! Who knows, but what they'll send the 8th Air Force down to Vienna! The boys said they don't think that Berlin is as rough as Vienna. In fact, everyone knows, or should know, that the roughest missions are always over these concentrated oil refineries, around the big cities. They have guns deployed around different targets. But, around the oil refineries, they are around but one target. For example, Brux has as many guns in a 5 mile area as Berlin has, all told! So, there you have it! The raids on the big cities are not so rough, from the flier's point of view!

Today, we had a big formal inspection again, with Colonel Jasper officiating, as usual. One thing about these inspections, it makes you feel like you've done yourself good by cleaning house + getting all dressed up. (3/24/45b)

*Connecticut

**German: Under the Linden, a famous tree-lined street in the middle of Berlin

Clare Boothe Luce was one of the most colorful American women of the twentieth century. Born out of wedlock in an unpromising part of New York, she rose to fame as a playwright whose works were performed on Broadway and in Hollywood screenplays in the thirties. She was editor of *Vanity Fair* magazine and, in search of adventure, served as a war correspondent in Europe in the early forties before being elected to Congress for two terms and known as an outspoken Republican. She was elected "Woman of the Year" by newspaper editors. She also served as ambassador at Rome. In her biography, *Price of Fame: The Honorable Clare Boothe Luce*, by Sylvia Jukes Morris (Random House, 2014), she was characterized as possessing "charm, humor, coquetry, intellect, ambition."[34]

The March 24 mission for the Fifth Bomb Wing attacked the Daimler Tank Factory in the Marienfelde section of Berlin with 148 Fortresses escorted by fifty-eight Lightnings and 201 Mustangs. Enemy fighters including Me262s, Me109s, and a few Me163s attacked the rear of the bomber formation near Berlin. The 332nd FG lost five Mustangs, and nine Forts went down.[35]

MISSION #22 – PRAGUE – MARCH 25

On March 25, they sent us to Prague, the capital city of Czechoslovakia. The target was the major airport for the city, where a large number of German military planes were parked. Prague was a fairly long trip, 675 miles from Foggia. But, the route they sent us on took us over small cities which had been targets and where there were still anti-aircraft guns. So, the exciting thing about this mission was the dodging of anti-aircraft batteries which were detected, on a scattered basis. We had not been briefed that there would be any anti-aircraft fire. We carried fragmentation bombs (Daisy Cutters) for the purpose of doing as much damage as possible to the aircraft there. There was no opposition over the target area so we were able to do a good job. There was lots of fire and smoke as we left the target area. (G.H.N., 1991)[36]

On this bright, clear day, the entire 15th Air Force paid a visit to Prague

While you folks were wearily standing through the ritual of the reading of the Passion, this war-torn Palm Sunday, I was in a "Bee-one-seven" circling the capital city of Czechoslovakia. Between 12:15 and 12:45, on this bright, clear day, the entire 15th Air Force paid a visit to Prague, or if you wish, "Praha!" It was the first time in a long time that they went there, at least since we've been here!

It seems that Prague is now more important because of the complex of airfields which surround the city + provide bases for the German planes to operate against the Russians! The field which we in the 5th Wing visited was the "Praha Main Airdrome," where it was estimated that the Krauts have over 250 planes. Likewise, the B-24 outfits visited 4 other fields, which have large numbers of planes too!

When the 97th got there, I could see a big pall of smoke rising to over 10,000 feet. Evidently, the fields had already been hit. Today, also for the first time, we carried fragmentation bombs, so called "Frags!" Frags are dreaded by all air crews, because they detonate so readily; and, since they come in clusters + look like dry-cell batteries, they often have difficulties

in getting them out, at bombs away. Many cases have been recorded of "frags" blowing up in + below ships! etc.

On good ground, they are most dreaded by people because they burst + scatter along a wide area. One little frag bomb will kill anyone in a ¼ mile square area. They are sometimes called "anti-personnel" bombs! Anyhow, each plane in the 15th Air Force carried 38 clusters, or 225 frag bombs to the Prague Airdromes. With about 750 planes on the raid, you can figure that about 160,000 individual bombs struck, within a ½ hour.

The fighter escort was tangling with some German planes, once again

Planes were coming at the town from all directions + the bombardiers saw planes burning all over the place! In all probability, these frag bombs made a lot of holes in the city, too. Believe me, it is a wonderful sight to see a pall of black smoke over one of these key cities of the "Greater Reich." Prague has not been hit since the air forces were going after industrial areas. So, the poor people of Prague really got an awakening today! The flak was light + inaccurate, so they really must have been caught unawares!

While the bomber formations were wending their way over the city, the fighter escort was tangling with some German planes, once again. We saw 3 P-51s fly overhead with a Me262 (jet propelled) box between them. Finally, we saw them all disappear from our vision, in a screaming dive!

I got a good chance to see, from the side, how effectively a smoke screen covers a city. On the way up, all we could see of the city of Linz was the Danube River going in one side of a smoke screen + coming out the other! It really hides a town. Then, we came back by Linz again + the smoke screen had stayed together; but, it moved to the south; so, Linz stood out like a sore thumb! Linz is one of the rougher targets, these days! I also got a look at the cultural city of Salzburg, today. Salzburg is [a] little west of Linz, also on the Danube River. Salzburg is supposed to be the home of art, music + education in Germany!

Anyway, it was a beautiful, clear day over Austria, Germany, and Czechoslovakia; so, we saw the sights! By the way, Kiefer + I led the 340th Squadron for the 2nd time, today! Squadron lead seems to be a fairly easy position to fly, too!

Prague looked more like the Monsanto Chemical factory in full blast, than it did like a great European city

This evening, I attended mass at the chapel; and Father Musch gave out olive branches in place of palms; and, he also read the passion and gave us a nice sermon about keeping holy-holy week! So, I got in a good mission and also had an enjoyable church service on this Palm Sunday! I still offer my prayers up for your health+ happiness, Ma! Don't ever think that I forget you for a minute, no matter how excited, nervous or distressed I get!

Outside of that, all is well, and today's trip was one of those inspiring ones in which we saw some of the fruits of our efforts, for a change. Prague looked more like the Monsanto Chemical factory in full blast, than it did like a great European city, on Sunday morning! Oh, well, they didn't hit any buildings, anyhow! (3/25/45)

(See Appendix I-22)

In defense of the Eighth Air Force, most of the deadliest missions of the air war in Europe were flown by the England-based units. While it is true that the bomber boys flying from Italy had less publicity than their comrades in England, the latter was very much deserving of its historical banner, the "Mighty Eighth." Still, with due respect to the Fifteenth, Hess[37] remarked:

> The 5th BW had been the pioneers in strategic bombing in the MTO, its crews creating a gallant and proud record for themselves with the B-17. Tragically, due to a total lack of publicity at the time, their names, and the names of the targets they attacked, are not nearly as well-known as their brother crews in England. However, for those who remember names like Vienna, Ploesti, Steyr, Blechhammer, Budapest, and Odental, they know, and will never forget, the flak and fighters they met there.

They lost two engines at the target and had to go down, so they made for Russian-held ground

I went into Foggia + saw "When Irish Eyes are smiling," at the British Theatre, this afternoon. It was a nice, Technicolor film but the sound was not too good. However, I enjoyed the Irish ballads very much!

Today, Foster scavenged us a motor generator which we can put outside of our tent and use it to generate power for our lights! Now, we'll be able to have lights 24 hours a day + we won't have to burn candles if we choose to stay up after 11:00 p.m. We use the generator to charge a B-17 battery + then shut off the generator. With this new "putt-putt" generator, we can have constant electrical current and I will be able to use my electric shaver, at long last!

Remember me telling you that Dunn's brother, a staff sergeant, came over on the boat with us? He is stationed in the 483rd Bomb Group! [also in the 5th Bomb Wing] Well, his plane went to the Russian lines, after a Vienna raid, back in January, and they crash landed near Lake Balaton, west of Budapest, with all of his crew, none of whom was hurt! From there, he was flown back to Bari by A.T.C. This afternoon he came up to see his brother + he spent the time telling us about it this afternoon! Quite an interesting experience! They lost two engines at the target + had to go down, so they made for Russian-held ground + landed just inside their territory! (3/26/45)

All we need is a flush toilet. But, who in Italy uses a flush toilet?

In the meantime, Foster + Dunn were working on our lighting system again today, and we now have several lights which operate from our own power plant [drawing included]. The new toaster which navigator Smith devised, enables us to cook toast on the side of the stove at the same time we are frying eggs atop the stove. In that way, both eggs + toast get done simultaneously + a hot egg sandwich results! I'm telling you we are really set up. All we need is a flush toilet. But, who in Italy uses a flush toilet. Foster is trying to devise a method of making either ice or an electric refrigerator now! (3/27/45)

The birds stayed on the ground for the 2nd consecutive day, today, due to the weather which is supposed to prevail between here and the target. It is now getting so that it is unusual when the weather is not favorable for a mission. It used to be the other way.

So, we spent the morning installing two new windows in our tent, one by my bed + one by Foster's. The glass in Foster's comes from the windshield of a B-17, while the glass in mine is simply some film from an aerial camera, with the emulsion washed off. You wouldn't believe it but the film stiffens + makes good "glass" when stapled to a window frame. The new windows give us a total of 4 now; and, the tent should be much brighter, what with the warm, sunny days we have all the time, now!
(3/28/45)

The 15th lost more planes than ever before, last Saturday

Once again, the big birds kept their big rubber "feet" on their steel-mat roosts, as inclement weather enveloped Italy. Perhaps it is just as well, too, because everyone is huddled around the radio "sweating out" the Russian advance towards Vienna. You realize what it would mean to our morale around here, if the old city of "Wien" could be captured. Because, nobody will doubt that, at present, Vienna offers more opposition than any of the big city targets, on the map!

The 15th lost more planes than ever before, last Saturday, when the Forts from the 5th Wing went away out of its range to hit the Daimler-Benz tank factory at Berlin. But, it's items like that which are shortening the war!

This morning, I attended mass at 9:30, high mass at that! This afternoon I was out "shooting landings" again.

I received a letter from Bob, today, writing from the general hospital. He says his appetite is better + he has plenty to read + he listens to the radio. He's worried about his lack of weight, though. He's afraid he'll not be able to regain it, while in bed. He says to use his original unit's address, (i.e. Co. E., 85th Mt Infantry). He says that the doctors joked with him about whether I came up to see him or the nurse, the first of this month! You'd never know that Bob was badly hurt, for the morale he has! That's what does him good, too!

You should see the dog, which our enlisted men have play with their rabbit pet! "Prop-wash" is the dog + "Bugs" is the bunny's name! I was down at their tent for a while this evening. They have the same accommodations

as we have; and, they have an electric fan in addition!!! So, our crew really lives in style, from head to foot.

You know that Conway + Jones are tech sergeants now, + the other 4 are staff sergeants. In other words, they will not be promoted any more, for that is what the table of organization calls for on a B-17. Well, the eggs are on + so I must be off of this letter. (3/29/45)

"Oscar" has 7 sorties, now...he even devised a little tin flak suit which he put over the monkey's body

Today, the main events were training missions because the combat mission was cancelled for the 4th consecutive day. So, for the 3rd day, I made landings for an hour, this morning. This time, I flew with our operations officer!

I was up to visit one of the fellows at the 342nd Sqdn., who came over with us. His name is Lane, and he went all through cadets with me. He bought a cute monkey (12" tall) at Rome, a toy like some of yours, Betty. They call him Oscar + Oscar is tied on a rope, which goes around Lane's neck, on a mission. "Oscar" has 7 sorties, now! Lane has taken him on each mission since he came back from Rome. He even devised a little tin flak suit which he put over the monkey's body. Lane says that they sometimes sit him up on the instrument panel so they can look at him, during the trip. Talk about foolishness, huh? He's a cute little thing + Lane even has a little stool for him to sit on in their tent, between missions. He's only a wooly affair; but, he gets a lot of attention for a toy! They even have a air medal for him + they've put him in for a promotion. How about that! (3/30/45)

This Air Corps is one mental battle after another and that was just another one, for me

Betty, that long letter was the nicest one I've received from you for some time. I shall keep it, you can bet! In fact, there are many facts on it which will have to serve as a reference guide, in the near future!

Yes, Betty, I did feel that I was lucky to be so near that I could get to see Bob + find out the real story! I felt like I had done myself a good turn!

As for watching amputations + abdominal incisions, kidney removals, etc., I saw 8 separate, complete and successful operations, between 10:00 p.m. + 3:00 a.m. on the night of March 5! I didn't mind it, at all, once I had plunged into the spirit of it all; and, I asked more questions than Baby Snooks! I saw a duplicate of Bob's operation + I saw every working part of the abdominal + chest cavity of the human being. The only thing that bothered me was thinking that I too, was in danger of something similar occurring to me; and, that bothered me, no end, for 2 missions! But, I finally conquered it + I'm okay now. This Air Corps is one mental battle after another + that was just another one, for me!

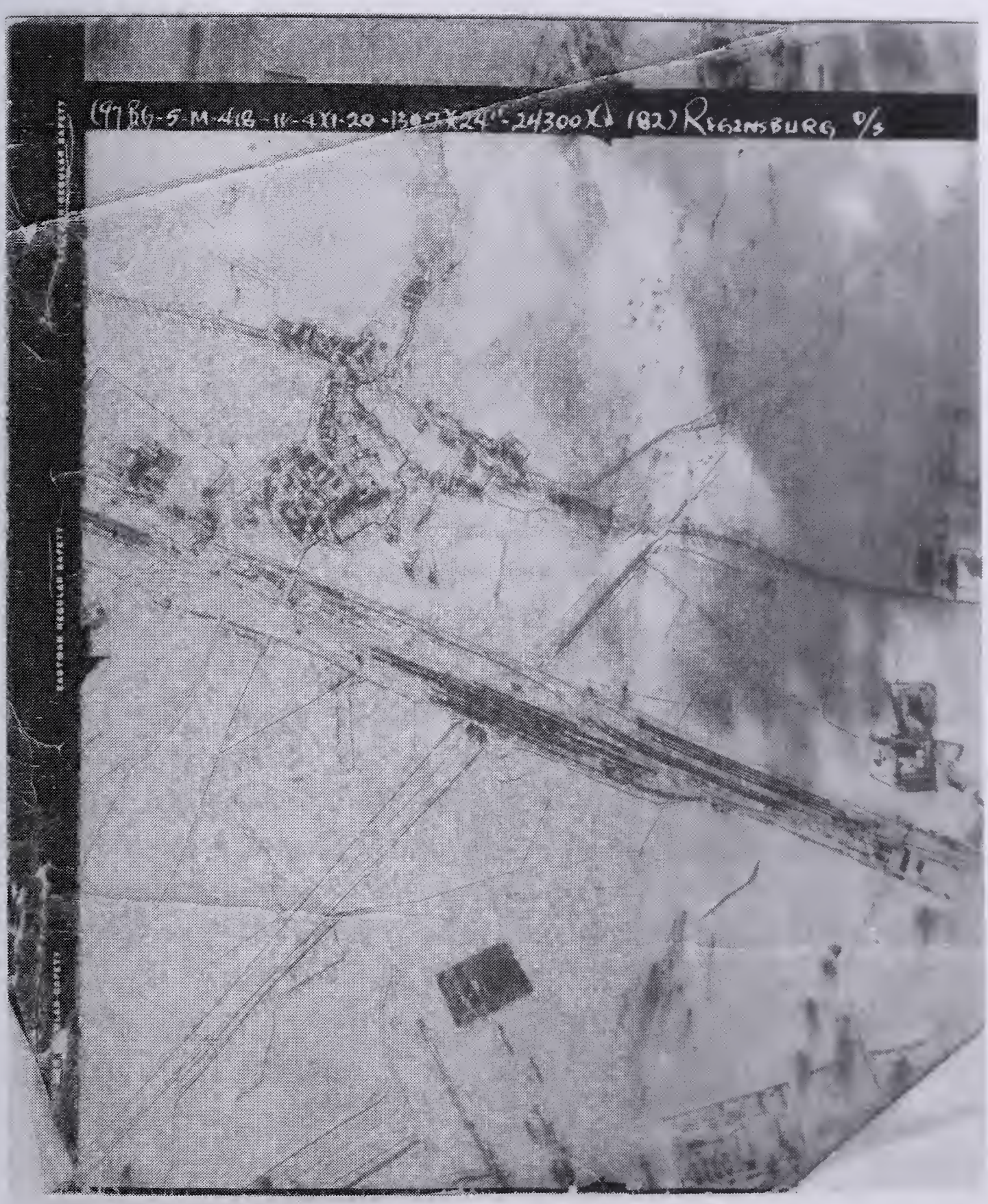
Last night, I succeeded in contacting the 70th General Hospital where Bob is, after trying vainly for 2 weeks. I got the call through about midnight + I talked with someone who works in the same ward where Bob is! He said, "He is progressing very much better, for the past two weeks" (since getting into the hospital). He added, "He was running a temperature for a while, but he is okay, now. He is doing very well." So, add to that what you get from his letters, which I can imagine is very little, + you'll have the story!

Well, I'll close now, for I am on the flying schedule again, tomorrow. That is, I'm flying for the 1st time in a week, on the mission! Here is a 50 cent piece of old Italian currency. It is not the Allied military currency which we use, commonly! However, the Eyeties still use the old paper money which they have in circulation. (3/31/45)

So came to an end another month in the many lives of George Neilson, USAF: the historic, the mundane, the technical, the comical, and the social being. War and B-17s notwithstanding, one more remark added to the continuing story of how the most precious commodity of the day made life good in the tent city of the Fifteenth Air Force at Foggia, Italy:

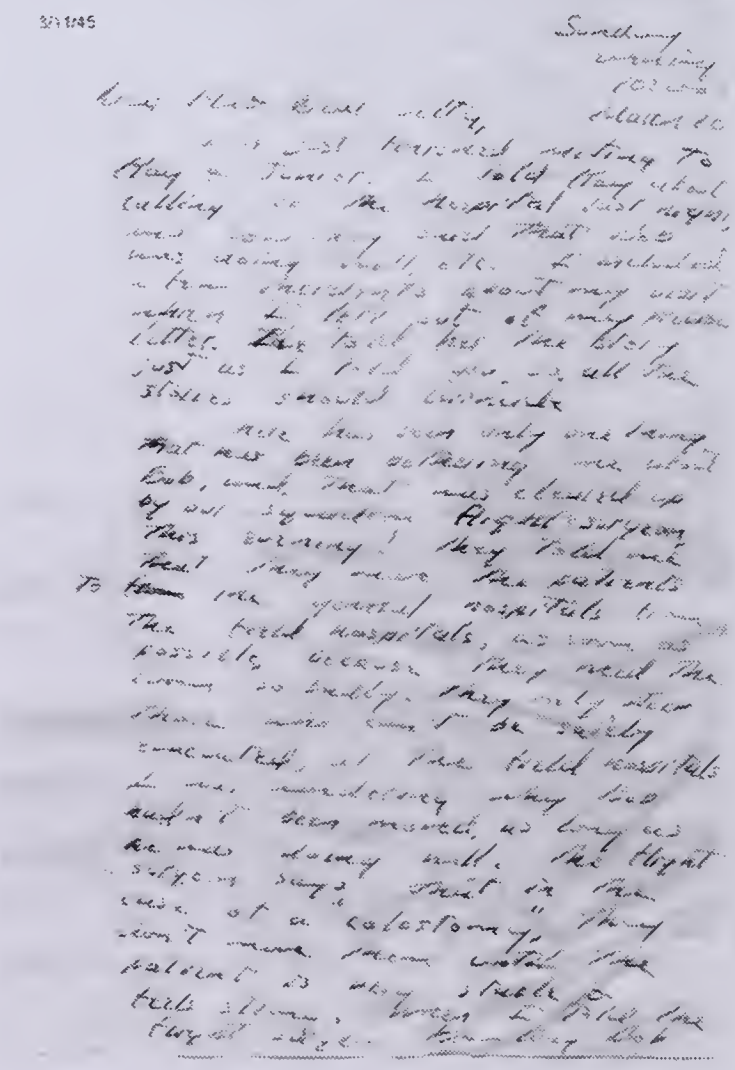
Well, I have all my Easter cards lined up on my shelf, for tomorrow, no Easter eggs, but, you can bet we'll have some hen's eggs, anyways! (3/31/45)

Map of Mediterranean target area pinpointing frequent targets of the 15th AF in Three Year Commemorative Issue, 97th Bomb Group, June 4, 1945



Reconaissance photo of the marshalling yards at Regensburg, Germany

Lt. Robert C. (Bob) Neilson. George's second elder brother who served on Guadalcanal and in Italy during WWII.



Letter to home in which George described his viist to his brother Bob at a field hospital at Pistoia, Italy. March, 1945

Chapter 20

Combat Missions, April 1945

Amendola Air Base
Foggia, Italy

Victory of the Strategic Bombing Campaign
and the Collapse of the Third Reich

Easter Sunday morning, April 1, 1945. One thousand, three hundred Allied warships are postured off the coast of Ryukyu Island in the far south end of the Japanese archipelago. Half a million men are about to face off for battle. It is D-Day in the Pacific. Twelve weeks of bitter fighting and 50,000 American casualties later, the tiny fragment of the Japanese homeland also known also as Okinawa is in Allied hands. The latest threat in the Pacific, airplanes loaded with explosives and flown by a select cadre of pilots who sacrifice their lives for the emperor are ramming the decks of US ships, wreaking havoc and terrorizing the US Navy.[1] There and half a world away, the Axis powers are in a desperate struggle for survival, but as yet there is no indication from the fanatics in Tokyo and Berlin that peace is imminent on either front.[2]

In Germany, the remaining fighter pilots in Hitler's dwindling arsenal, many of them aces, were called (some from hospital beds) to form a new Sturmgruppe (Storm Group) to take to the skies and, against overwhelming odds, get a few kills. If they were unable to shoot down Allied planes, they were to ram them and then bail out if possible. The suicidal Operation Wehrwolf took down several bombers but ended in the decimation of half the German jet force.[3] These desperation measures were a sign that in both major theaters of the war, the Axis powers were cracking.

The continuation of the war in Europe beyond the end of 1944 was, for all practical purposes, mass murder of the German people at the hands of the Nazi warlords. By April, there was nothing that would convince a rational individual that the war was not lost for Germany. Even the German General Staff and Hitler's own clique in Berlin knew this.[4]

The airmen and ground troops knew by the beginning of April that the war would soon end, yet that end was still elusive. Two new fears gripped the men in uniform. One was a psychological anomaly by which those who had survived so much came to wonder if they would become one of the last casualties of the war. They did not dare to think that they had made it yet. The other fear was the specter of a war still raging in the Far East. Shipment to the Pacific was a real possibility for men who had not completed their enlistments or their required missions in Europe. At the time, thirty-five missions were required by the Fifteenth AF.[5]

For the Luftwaffe, the war seemed to continue only by inertia. It was as if fighting was the only thing the men had left to live for. Air battles over the Reich occurred much as they had for the past four years, but now there was virtually nothing for the doomed Jerries (Germans) to defend.[6] Hitler's Thousand-Year Reich was dying, in the throes of spastic heaves, gasping for one last breath.

For the Fifteenth AF, the war in the MTO hardly wound down. The last month before the armistice was one of the most active for the Foggia-based fliers. Missions were flown daily. Fighters and heavies bombed, targeting railroad bridges in Austria and Italy. Strafing missions aimed to destroy aircraft on the ground. Fifteen heavy bombers were lost at the rail yards in Linz, Austria.[7] The April 15 raids were part of an all-out assault on remaining targets and support of the Fifth and Eighth armies for which most of the planes in the Fifteenth were engaged.

> The last ground battle of the war was launched by the Fifteenth Air Force from the air. An offensive performance described by Field Marshal Alexander as the "Last Battle to End the War" was held April

> 9th-18th 1945. A bombardment by 1,233 heavy bombers of the Fifteenth Air Force saturated the German defenses by dropping nearly 25,000 bombs within five miles of Allied Forces.[8]

American researchers of the Strategic Bombing Survey flew to Germany even before the war ended to survey the damage done by the bombing campaign. One was an intelligence officer named Dr. Bruce C. Hopper.

> Hopper's unpublished field notes read like those of an archaeologist surveying the ruins of a far-distant civilization: "Darmstadt, a shambles seemingly without a roof intact...Frankfurt. Looks like Pompeii magnified...Kassel...just miles of rust staring to the sky ... Wuerzburg, a crumpled mass of peanut shells. Leuna...an enormous desert of iron skeletons ... Magdeburg ... another ghost city ... Cologne ... indescribable. One gets a feeling of horror; nothing, nothing is left."[9]

Journalists who met with the group all agreed that they were witnessing "destruction and chaos in a degree never before known in the world."

> By early April, there was little left to bomb in Germany. The oil war had been won. Synthetic plants were down to 6 percent of normal output and production of aviation gasoline had stopped altogether. The oil campaign "clipped the wings of the Luftwaffe" and impaired the Wehrmacht's mobility, preventing it from protecting coal resources that powered the synthetic plants...
>
> By early April, 1945, the Allied air forces' transportation campaign had also achieved its major objectives. Germany's river and canal network had been disabled and its rail system was

in ruins, and with it, the coal industry that powered the economy.[10]

As the air war went on, seemingly oblivious to the chaos and devastation in the Reich, the German economy was crumbling like so many of the buildings that lined its rubble-filled streets. Wehrmacht units were surrendering en masse; desertion was rampant. Refugees fleeing from the Red Army's rampage in the east were everywhere. Life became a battle of individual survival. German POW guards began collaborating with their captors to escape the Russian horde and their bestial treatment of the German population with unbridled killing, destruction, and rapine. Hitler and his few firebrand loyalists were hunkered down in an underground bunker as rockets, tank shells, and artillery rained down on the capital in a crescendo of terrifying violence.[11]

From outside the perimeter of the city, truck-mounted stacks of *Stalin Organ* rocket launchers poured their destructive missiles into the doomed city. The horrors of Operation Barbarossa, the savage German assault on the Soviet Union in 1941 and the subsequent four-year struggle in which twenty million Soviet citizens perished, had finally come home to visit the German people.[12]

In the west, British and American armies under commanding generals Patton (US) and Montgomery (UK) had crossed the Rhine almost unopposed.[13] The land campaigns squeezing Nazi Germany from both sides climaxed when American and Soviet troops met on the Elbe River on April 25. The world applauded as the two great armies basked in this singular moment of triumph.[14] Sadly, the euphoria on the Elbe was short-lived, for no sooner did the smoke of war settle when the two new superpowers were to square off in a bitter, decades-long ideological Cold War.

Amidst what seemed to be one of the greatest catastrophes in history, yet a greater ugliness oozed from the mortal wounds of the Third Reich. The first of the Nazi concentration camps had been discovered and liberated in July 1944 by the Soviet Army on their march through Poland. At Majdanek, the camp staff attempted

to destroy the machinery of death and the crematoria before the Red Army arrived. Following in rapid succession were Belzdek, Sobibor, and Treblinka. Auschwitz, the most notorious of the death camps, was liberated in January 1945. Shocking no less to the world than to the men who uncovered it, "The Final Solution," the Nazi pogrom of industrialized murder of Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, and other "misfits" of the Third Reich was laid bare before the conquering Allies. The full account, the scope, and the innumerable host of victims of the atrocities of the Holocaust may never be known while time endures. The grisly scenes of slaughter and crude disposal of more than six million people will ever cry out against the architects and their minions who reached lower than the fiends of Hades in their insidious brutality.[15]

Adding trauma to tragedy, American servicemen were disheartened to learn of the passing of their commander in chief. On April 12 at "the Little White House" in Warm Springs, Georgia, FDR suffered a massive cerebral hemorrhage. Whatever the politics of the men in arms, Roosevelt was the only president many of them had ever known. Deprived of seeing the victory he and his countrymen had fought so hard for, the longest-serving president in US history became part of the ages. The nation mourned but did not pause in its fight for victory.[16] The seamless transfer of power in time of crisis is one of the hallmarks of American democracy. The gauntlet passed to a man who, in less than four months' time, would make the wrenching decision that brought the planetary conflagration of World War II to a horrifying end, opening at once an epoch in history that would hold the fears all mankind in its grasp. President Harry Truman would bear the heavy task of navigating the great ship of state from the tempest of war to the precarious seas of peace. The day after Roosevelt died, April 13, Vienna fell to Soviet forces.[17]

The air war in Europe underwent a major change in its final weeks. On April 16, ETO air commander Gen. Carl Spaatz announced that the strategic bombing war had been won, and the combined air forces would turn their efforts toward tactical support of the ground armies.[18]

For the Fifteenth, this meant supporting the movement of the Fifth and Eighth Armies as they drove the Germans out of northern Italy. Fighters would be assigned more strafing duties than escort missions, flying low and shooting up whatever in their path was valuable to the enemy cause, including planes on the ground, locomotives and rolling stock, military convoys, and even troop concentrations. At the same time, antiaircraft weaponry continued to concentrate as the Nazi radius of control receded. Flak guns were ubiquitous near strategic targets, in the woods, and even mounted in box cars, the sides of which would be shed to reveal the guns and their operators who had become experts at picking off Allied aircraft. Bombing targets were shifted from oil refineries to rail yards and bridges. Bridges were very hard to hit because of their narrow profile, so they required repeated bombing with often disappointing results.[19]

On April 26, the Fifteenth flew one of the last missions of the war, a photo mission to Prague escorted by Red Tails who downed five Me109s and strafed targets. Thirty-one Liberators flew against tactical targets in northern Italy, which was partly diverted to the marshaling yards at Klagenfurt. One Lib went down. All but one crewman survived. Sgt. Edward S. Kovaleski of Southbridge, Massachusetts, was listed MIA and was declared dead a year later, likely the last wartime casualty of the Fifteenth Air Force.[20]

MISSION #23 – MARIBOR, YUGOSLAVIA – APRIL 1

On Sunday, April 1, our crew was sent to a small city, Maribor, only 2 hours from our base, in Yugoslavia. We were on our way at 6:00 a.m. and back on the ground at 12:15 noon. Maribor is just across the Adriatic, north and east of Foggia. This was not a major mission; and, it was only for our group. The target was a bridge crossing a wide river, carrying a road and a railroad track. The river flowed to the Adriatic. It was always difficult to hit bridges with heavy bombers, or with any type bomber, or fighter, for that matter. In the first place, a bridge looks like a needle

from altitude. Then, when you enter the physical factors: wind, drift, speed, etc., the odds of hitting a bridge with any airplane are *high. Such was the case at Maribor. Of the 36 planes that went over the target, probably 10 had some bombs hit the bridge. The intelligence pictures, after the raid, showed that the road and rails were eliminated, in some sections, so that you could see through to the water, while the framework remained in place. This was better than most results of bridge bombing with heavy bombers. It meant that the span could be replaced in a matter of days, depending upon the enemy's priorities. Nevertheless, these results were called successful. The opposition, at Maribor, was nil; so, it was a good way to spend Sunday morning in Italy because we got credit for a mission, in the same way as if we had gone to one of the "big" targets.

Air Corps duty time in the combat theater was measured in terms of numbers of missions flown to assigned targets. In Italy, a crew could be rotated back to the States after either 30 or 35 combat missions, depending upon the judgment of the local commanders. (G.H.N., 1991)[21]

*i.e. low

Easter had to be postponed while the world carried on in its strife and tribulation

Today was a grand + glorious Easter Sunday, here in Foggia! It was a day when everybody could have safely dressed in their dress uniform + not be afraid of the weather. One could not help but have a faint tinge of Easter atmosphere somehow, also!

However, my celebration of Easter had to be postponed until this afternoon, while the world carried on in its strife + tribulation. For, today was also April 1st + April Fools day, which also meant that "the war must go on." So, I flew on another feast day! (Remember, I flew on Christmas day.) I might even mention that today's mission was "one of the better ones," as they say. It was an "enjoyable" one, to have on Easter Sunday. It was very unique, too, because we were back in time for the noon meal! But, we had gotten up at 3:00, in order to get "into the blue" by 6:30.

The target was a big railroad bridge in the city of Maribor, which is one of the principal connecting links in the Vienna-Zagreb rail line + is being imminently threatened by the Russians. Maribor was only 350 miles from base, being in Yugoslavia, on the Austrian border.

The bombs from our box "walked right along" the bridge after we rallied off the target

Anyhow, bombs were away at 10:25 + probably we got there before they expected us, for we generally hit the targets between noon + 1 o'clock. In all probability, we caught many Yugoslavs in church, rather than in their shelters. We carried 6 – 1000 lb. bombs today + Dunn, who flew with me for the first time, said that the bombs from our box "walked right along" the bridge after we rallied off the target. The enlisted men reported that the bridge was "blown all to hell." That will happen too, if [a] 1000 pounder hit anywhere near anything. At least, we could realize that our efforts were not in vain, in spending our time on a mission, when we could have been in the Easter Parade in Foggia (that should be good for some laughs).

Although Maribor is 350 miles from base, it only took us 1 ½ hrs. to come home. We really made time, coming down across Yugo + the Adriatic. We also went close to Zagreb which is the last stronghold of German resistance in Yugo. It is now like a pocket + should soon be annihilated. You see, the Germans must be eliminated from the vicinities of Graz, Maribor, Bruck, + Zagreb, if the Russians are to make a union with the Allies in northern Italy!

So, we were on the ground at high noon; and, I finished my dinner by 1:15. I was very tired because I flew while still nursing my cold; and, I had a little trouble in breathing at 27,000 feet. However, I used the emergency flow of oxygen; so, I had a constant flow in my mask, instead of just the "demand" amount, as is the usual case.

Therefore, I peeled off my sweaty underwear, took a shower + flopped onto my "sack," for the entire afternoon, just like I used to do at Gulfport, when we flew high altitude practice missions, in the morning. It was really a pleasant feeling to have accomplished a sortie + be back on the ground at

noon! No, it wasn't a milk run, either, for the "flying spam cans" generally get sent to those targets.

This evening, I attended Fr. Musch's high mass, up at Group. He had an organ + a choir for the occasion of Easter. He also had some decorations + some Easter lilies on hand to elaborate upon the ordinarily drab atmosphere of the chapel. So, all in all, there was a bit of resplendence + grandeur for the high mass which he + the enlisted men's choir sang!

We even had a special dinner of chicken, peas, rice, string beans + cherry pie, this evening. You must remember that whenever I mention "a special meal," I refer to something better than our ordinary chow; but, it in no way compares with an only half decent meal that you might prepare! In other words, a "good meal" is only a relative term!

The Gestapo headquarters is in Innsbruck, while Heinrich himself lives in Salzburg

I notice that the headquarters for Adolf + his gang is now in the vicinity of Innsbruck, Salzburg + Berchtesgaden, all of which are in our area. Those towns are on the southern border of Austria, in the northern reaches of the Alps. They claim that the Gestapo headquarters is in Innsbruck, while *Heinrich, himself, lives in Salzburg. I doubt if we'd ever bomb those places with hopes of destroying any of these men. I believe that the authorities figure that they'll "come out in the wash" when the German people do fold up.

Well, one of our principal targets, now, is Linz. Linz is an industrial city on the Danube, between Munich + Vienna. There, they make **Benzol and the Herman Goering Steel works also has a large establishment, there. Furthermore, Linz is a rail center for supplies going to Vienna. Since it is 80 miles west of Vienna, it is likely to be one of the last, large targets in southern ***Germany, if not all of Germany! They call it the big "L." Vienna is the big "V," Brux was the big "B," + Munich, the big "M," etc.

This article about the 33rd Field Hospital, (Bob was in the 32nd) might give you an idea about what it's like, there. However, I don't believe that too many U.S.O. girls visit those nasty places. But, those nurses do a wonderful job. (4/1/45)

*Heinrich Himmler was the Reichsfuehrer (Reich leader) of the dreaded SS security police, the Gestapo. He was the second most powerful man in Germany during World War II. Himmler was the senior Nazi official responsible for implementing the Final Solution.
**a coal derivative fuel
***From 1938 until the defeat of the Nazis, Austria was part of Germany.

Anecdotally, George mentioned in this letter that Mary Ellen Reilley, the nurse who attended to Bob, was from Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.

(See Appendix I-23)

Well, the big news today is that Kiefer completed his tour of duty!!! He flew his 35th sortie + he's finished now. Boy, you never saw a more happy fellow than he, when I greeted him when he got back! He's all finished + all he'll do is juke around Italy for a couple of weeks + then go home! Boy! That must be a wonderful feeling. In a few days, I expect to be "checked out" + I'll be able to finish up with the enlisted men, all of whom have about the same number of sorties as me! Of course, we both regretted not being able to finish up together; but, that's the way it happens in this outfit. (4/2/45)

The war may be over as far as the people in the states are concerned; but, you'd better tell the Germans that, for they're still shooting

Today, the mission on which I was scheduled was scrubbed because of weather conditions in the target area, although we had a beautiful, hot day here at the base.

This afternoon, I received your letter of March 26 (8 days). Needless to say, I was no little bit annoyed about you being misled into thinking that the war was to be over at midnight on Saturday, March 24! Perhaps you can realize how much better it is to be a little less optimistic, as I have

tried to tell you. For, in the long run, ultra-conservatism is far better than being disappointed too often. If you'd take heed to Adolf's promise that he'll fight to the last ditch, you'll have a better idea about when peace will be declared in Europe. I don't believe it will be soon, either!!! The war may be over as far as the people in the states are concerned; but, you'd better tell the Germans that, for they're still shooting. Perhaps some of the "arm chair strategists" in the states will become disgruntled + restless because the war will seem to drag on after this big break through!

I also read your suggestions on eggs, which we will heed the next time we have eggs. (For the last two evenings, we have been laying off the eggs.) Tonight, our bread box, in the tent, was due for a cleaning after we discovered a half-dead mouse in it, this evening. Evidently, he had crawled into it, unnoticed while we were eating, last night. So, he was a weary looking affair when we opened up the box this evening!

I thought I'd send you these pictures of Italy's most beautiful little town, which I passed through en route to see Bob! These pictures came out in this week's Yank magazine! (4/3/45)

George was referring to the town of Siena.

Sure enough, I am a first lieutenant effective March 31

Well, Ma and Betty, the last of the "shave-tails" has advanced, in the Neilson family! For, as I was restfully sitting on my cot reading the March issue of Reader's Digest this morning, a sergeant from the orderly room walked into our domicile + said, "Lt. Neilson, you can start wearing your silver one, now!" Then, I jumped at him to look at the orders. Sure enough, I am a first lieutenant effective March 31!!! So there you have it! Although I am getting it before quite a number of fellows who came over at the same time as I did, I still say, "It's about time." So, it was 11 months + 16 days from the date I was commissioned. Naturally, I feel as if I had accomplished a little something, for a change. Today, of course, Kiefer was very pleased that I got my first lieutenancy + he put my new bar on for me!

Today, the mission was once again cancelled because of the weather, so, that accounts for me being in the tent, this morning! However, this afternoon, I was on another practice bombing mission. This time, Dunn

was the bombardier, for whose benefit the mission was scheduled. So, we went to the Mediterranean coast of the "boot" of Italy + made autopilot bomb runs on a couple of targets, down there.

I got another letter from Bob, today. He wants to hear more from me, I guess! This time, he speaks of sitting up in bed + "having a bottle of beer tonight" (which night was March 26). So, you draw your own conclusions.

I think I'll close now + go to bed early, thanking the Lord for my promotion, especially tonight. So, now it's 1st Lt. George Neilson (ahem). I'll always be doing my best for you, Ma. You are my constant inspiration – thanks for what you've always done for me So, I'll close now + hope you are well + enjoying yourself whenever possible! How about going out to dinner "on me!" Please, Ma, I wish you would. Whenever you buy something for yourself, with my money, which is so seldom, I feel haughty, victorious + proud! So, please do that, you + Betty! (4/4/45)

MISSION #24 – UDINE, ITALY – APRIL 5

With the war winding down, we began to be assigned to targets that would diminish the German supply availability. This meant that we would go after air fields, supply depots, and railroad marshalling yards, where trains are assembled, or separated, and then made up for dispatch to their destination. Thus, on April 5, we, the 97th Bomb Group, along with 3 other groups were sent to Udine, in northern Italy, to eliminate a forward air base for the Apennine theater of operations. For a change, we carried 24 – 250 lb. bombs, which were timed to leave the bomb bay of the plane to provide a wider scatter than the typical load of 500 lb. bombs. This was fruitful as we destroyed 24 Me109s and 6 Junkers bombers, on the ground. (G.H.N., 1991)[23]

We went busting up across the Adriatic with black smoke pouring out of 3 engines

Today, I got my 24th sortie in! We flew to the Udine airdrome, where is located the last of the Luftwaffe in northern Italy! Udine is located near Venice, right above the head of the Adriatic Ocean! It is not in what they

call the Po River Valley, but it is to the east, between the "spillways" which flow from the Alps into the ocean. The object of today's mission was to spread fragmentation bombs over the spacious airfield + plane dispersal area. By doing that, they hoped to destroy the Messerschmitt fighters which we assumed to be on the ground.

As it turned out, the trip was of the "milk run" variety; for there was no opposition at the target. But, in keeping with the saying, that if it isn't one thing it's another, we had to worry about our engines, for the group pulled excessive power in order to make the short haul from Foggia to Udine + at the same time get to 27,000 feet. We had 3 engines running rough + had to use the "emergency rich" mixture control position in order to keep the engines from burning up! By using more gasoline, the cylinders ran colder; but, since the large quantities of gas in the engine could not be easily combusted, it all went out the exhaust in black smoke + sheets of flame. Therefore, we went busting up across the Adriatic with black smoke pouring out of 3 engines. However, that was not an alarming feature as long as the engines kept running + smooth! We certainly had to pray those engines to hold up 'til we got over the target. Then, of course, we could reduce power + "coast" home. For a while, we certainly had some excitement. But, we only had one alternative, stay in formation. As it was, we had to drop some of our frags into the ocean in order to keep up. Then, we chased the Group all across northern Italy 'til we got to the bomb run, where we finally sneaked into formation once again!

When we got back, I had to wring the sweat out of my wool underwear, after which I took a shower + shaved! Then, I went to the orderly room + arranged to send $70 home to you. So, that is what was accomplished today.

I think that Kiefer is going to Rome, for a few days, tomorrow. When he returns, he'll be leaving for home – lucky guy!

This evening, as well as last, I was going around accepting congratulations for the new color of my bar. Yes, it is a nice feeling to know that I've made some little progress, at least! To finish up + go home with the boys on the crew, that, I believe, is in the offing too! (4/5/45)

(See Appendix I-24)

I received a V-mail from Junior, today, which was written on March 20. He is now in France, in case you did not know it. I guess that he is glad to have moved. Just now, he is in a temporary tent encampment, so; I expect he will not be there too long.

Tonight, I went to mass + communion + benediction + novena services at the chapel. Tonight was 1st Friday, by the way; and, I had quite a bit to be thankful for, this time more than ever! (4/6/45)

This morning, I casually happened to look in to the fuel tank and found that it was empty

Well, here's something for a laugh! Last night the stove went out + Foster + Dunn decided that the shut-off valve had finally clogged up, so, they proceeded to tinker + tamper with it, until they stripped the threads + caused permanent damage to the valve. So, they left it unfixed, last night! This morning, I casually happened to look into the fuel tank + found that it was empty!!! That was the cause of our trouble. So, tonight, we have a full tank of gas, but we can't have our stove working until we get a new fitting for our fuel shut-off!! So, you see, even excellent mechanics + plumbers like Foster will make mistakes, sometimes!

I saw in Yank magazine where some of the soldiers are jealous because Bob's outfit received so much publicity for its efforts at the front! They resent the high caliber of the men in the 10th Mt. Division + the others! You see, the 10th was a hand-picked outfit which was in training long before Bob joined it! (4/7/45)

For some reason I can't seem to write any decent letters, anymore. Perhaps, I'm what they call, "nervous in the service." Anyhow, I didn't do much but lay around, reading.

I suppose the people are a bit perturbed, at home, because we are still fighting. I understand the war is over! You might tell the people to cool their heels for 4 or 5 more months. Then, they won't be so disappointed. It seems to me that people would rather be pleasantly surprised than bitterly disappointed, so often! (4/8/45)

MISSION #25 – BOLOGNA AREA, ITALY – APRIL 9

On April 9, I was in the most dramatic mission of my overseas assignment. Time had come for the heavy bombers to participate in what is, for them, an unusual assignment: support for the ground troops. Fighter planes (P-51s, P-38s, P-47s, etc.) and light bombers (B-25s and B-26s) usually flew the support missions, at low level hitting the so-called pinpoint targets, like critical bunkers or buildings and bridges, etc. that would directly support the ground forces moving through the area. But, the B-17s and the B-24s were "strategic" bombers designed to destroy targets behind the lines, usually from high altitudes, where the desired results would be achieved by laying down a "carpet" or "area pattern" of bombs with the vital parts of the target somewhere within the pattern.

At any rate, we, the entire 15th Air Force, were assigned to attack the flatlands of the farm-oriented valley of the Po River, running west to east through the city of Bologna, into the Adriatic beyond. The strategy was to cut off supply and support for the back-tracking German army which was being gradually forced out of the Apennine Mountains into the valley. The commanders wanted the Air Corps to "soften up" the German army deployed in that area, for what was intended to be the last push for the U.S. 5th Army, as they drove from south to north in the Apennine Mountains. Apparently, every bomber that the 15th Air Force could muster, 750 of them, the biggest one day contingent ever organized in Italy [was] to "parade" over the valley and drop fragmentation bombs, affectionately known as "daisy cutters." These were cluster bombs, designed to burst just above the ground and to disperse in a swirling fashion to damage or destroy everything in a 100 yd. radius. 750 bombers, dropping 10 clusters per plane, laid out quite a "carpet" in the valley, creating large quantities of smoke and dust.

It was exciting to be doing something that we knew would affect the daily conduct of the war as compared to the so-called strategic targets where we never knew, for sure, what we had accomplished. Or, if we did learn the results of our missions, it

was seldom clear what affect it had on the results of the war. For me, it was all the more an emotional experience to fly over the area where I had visited my brother. Of course, Bob's organization, the 10th Mountain Division, had become the "star of the show" for the 5th Army and did accomplish the breakthrough into the Po Valley, after long, winter, difficult mountain fighting. (G.H.N., 1991)[24]

All the information relative to the target was classified as top secret

I got my 25th sortie in today! I can't advise you about where I went because today's mission was highly secret. All the information relative to the target, the purpose + the type of information was classified as "top secret," a most unusual procedure. To illustrate the extraordinary measures that were taken to prevent a leak in any valuable information, the enlisted men on the crew were not briefed as to where we were going, why or what! They were not given a single detail upon which to base their judgment. All they had was to tell by where we went, i.e. to what "neck of the woods." Naturally, when we got to the target they knew about what it was all about. However, they weren't told + they must keep quiet what they did discover for themselves. We tried something new in Air Force procedure, which was to be scrutinized by military leaders all over the world! Perhaps you'll read about it, if success results, before I am allowed to write you about it. Anyhow, it was a novel experience + made us all feel "patriotic" and as if we were helping to do something to win the war!

I was pleased to read that you received the bunch of flowers, which I had arranged for in January! I had forgotten all about them; but, I am glad that they were delivered as the P.X. promised!

Well, Betty, I shall be anxiously awaiting the outcome of your thesis; so, don't forget to keep me informed! By the way, what is it all about? In a few weeks, it will be "Elizabeth Neilson, B.S. in Ed., M. Ed.," etc. My! My! You'll be an "intellectual."

We go to the target for the army; but, we come home for the wife and kids

I've got 10 more trips to the target, to make, now! So, you know how things are going. I heard a saying, the other day, which is very apropos to a day's average mission. "We go to the target for the army; but, we come home for the wife + kids!" In other words, after bombs go away, nobody cares about how the formation looks, as long as everyone gets home!

So it goes, another day, another dollar! Say, how's the peace rumors these days? We haven't heard many lately; but, perhaps you have. Keep me posted on them, will you?

P.S. The Jello didn't jell, I don't know what happened to it. I don't think it is cool enough around here. But, I'll keep trying!!! (4/9/45)

(See Appendix I-25)

The big event today, in the squadron, was a lecture on bombs + fuses by a major from Air Force headquarters. It was his duty to set us straight in regards to the safety in handling fuses + malfunctions in bombs. The object + theme of his lecture was to illustrate to us that a bomb is not a hit or miss "can filled with T.N.T." Rather, it is a precision weapon which is as safe to carry as an ordinary gun! Every bomb we drop is supposed to be able to be dropped from 5,000 feet without blowing up, if the safety pins are not removed! It seems that much was learned from the great raids against Ploesti, last year; and, one of the disturbing factors to the generals was that too many bombs had been dropped without the safety pins having been removed! In other words; the bombardiers did not adequately conduct their task!

Yesterday, I earned the 2nd oak leaf cluster for my air medal. I guess that I forgot to mention that to you, yesterday!

I don't believe that there is much else to tell tonight, except that I'm enclosing a handkerchief which was made from a parachute silk by the Eyeties, down town. I thought that perhaps you'd like something with our squadron insignia, or something, on it! The insignia on this handkerchief is ours, the same as I have on my jacket!

Oh yes, here's the latest report on eggs! We now get 4 eggs per package of cigarettes. Between you + me it's 4 eggs for a nickel but between us + the Eyeties, it means that the Eyeties sell the cigarettes for $1.25 per pack!

Well, I'll close, with that quotation + perhaps write to Miss Garrity! (4/10/45)

Helen Marie Garrity, a professional associate of Betty's, was to become a lifelong friend, and eventually an honorary member of the Neilson family for the remainder of her life. Her career in the field of health education closely paralleled Betty's. Both women eventually obtained doctorate degrees and became leaders in their growing field.

MISSION #26 – VIPITENO PASS – APRIL 11

Vipiteno is a small city, towards the southern end of the Brenner Pass in Italy, north of Verona. At this point, the strategic bombers of the 15th Air Force were being used in support missions, just as were the fighter planes, light bombers, etc. So, on April 11, the 97th Bomb Group was sent to hit a bridge over a river, one of the many bridges that cross the many little rivers that flow off the Alps Mountains into the pass areas. Actually, this target was an alternate for the primary target for the day. The target (Blechhammer) was cancelled because of bad weather conditions. As a result, Vipiteno became the objective for the 97th. Once again, hitting a bridge with high altitude bombers, or with any aircraft, becomes a lucky-if-you-hit-it situation, because a bridge looks like a "needle" in the gun-sights, or bomb sights, of an airplane. Then, when you add the factors of the speed of the plane, trajectory over the target, wind drift, fear of the pilot or bombardier, there is no way that the term "pinpoint" can be applied to this activity. As it developed, on this mission, none of the bombs hit the target. However, it was reported by the intelligence officers that the bridge was still standing. Still, in the "great" Air Corps tradition, everyone got credit for the mission. It never was necessary to prove that your bombs hit the targets, in order to get credit for the

mission. At any rate, the entire round trip to Vipiteno was only 4 ½ hrs.; and, as usual, it was enjoyable eating K-ration lunches en route home. (G.H.N., 1991)[25]

The entire 15th Air Force "on parade" across their foxholes

Today, I flew right over Bob's head twice (going and coming) as Pistoia was the Air Force Control Point for our penetration over the front lines, up over the Po Valley + into that blankety, blank Brenner Pass! On the way up, we went over at about 23,000 ft., + we passed right over Mt. Belvedere, too!

Our target was the Vipiteno Bridge, north of Bolzano. It is a vital link in the Brenner Pass rail line! On the bomb run, we had trouble with the No. 3 engine, when an oil line broke + oil began to spray all over everything! Finally, before bombs away, we had to stop the engine + feather the propeller. That meant that we had to traipse across northern Italy + the Po Valley all by ourselves, because we couldn't keep up with formation on 3 engines. But, we called the escort fighters and, there must have been plenty of them on hand, for we had 6 of them flying a daisy chain around us, as we limped across the Po Valley. Maybe that wasn't a pleasing sight! Finally, we crossed over the lines + safely over the Apennines, where the escort planes took their leave of us + zoomed homeward! Then, when we passed over Pistoia this time, we were all, all alone; so, I looked down (20,000 ft.) + tried, in vain, to locate the 70th General Hospital! Anyhow, I came close to seeing Bob, today! That makes 3 times in 3 days that the boys on the front lines have had the opportunity of seeing the entire 15th Air Force swing their formations "on parade" across their foxholes!

They even fired a line of anti-aircraft fire, below us, to mark the bomb run

For, now it can be told about that secret mission I wrote to you about on Monday! On Monday + Tuesday, every bomber in the 15th was sent in tactical support of a new offensive by the British 8th Army, along their new front in the Po Valley. In one of my most thrilling experiences, I took

part in this great mission, new in its type, in which the entire air force streamed across the front lines, over the heads of British *Tommies, with their bomb doors open, to bomb German positions just 2 miles from the British positions. The object was to devastate an entire area + make it ready for the British advance, now underway. We flew along the northern slopes of the mountains, over the valley, with arrows + red + white smoke pots to show us the way. They even fired a line of anti-aircraft fire, below us, to mark the bomb run! Then, as we rallied from the target, we were back over the 5th Army front, within 5 minutes. I sure hope that they got as big a thrill out of seeing us as we did in helping them.

Today, we reverted back to our normal role as a **strategic air force, by bombing in the Germans' "back lines." So, they're really putting the slug onto Adolf + his cohorts!

When I got back today, I found a letter from Bob in which he mentions how he received word of my last Friday night's call; and, he was pleased to hear that I was promoted, no end! So, he's up in a wheel chair + eating anything he can get his hands on! What could be better, Ma!?! I've written to him again, tonight, telling him the story about flying overhead, etc.

Well, I've now come back alone on 4 occasions + have had a total of 6 engine failures so far. That is not as bad as what some fellows get; but, its more experience than a lot of them have although I'm not boasting of it!

So, another day's work is completed. Now, I have only 9 more sorties to fly before I'll finish. Only 9 is not the way to look at it. Rather, I should say that I have 9 more "big ones" to fly! (4/11/45)

*soldiers, World War I term

**strategic (industrial targets) as opposed to tactical (in support of ground forces)

(See Appendix I-26)

Conclusion of the Apennine Mountain Campaign

By late March, significant reinforcements had arrived to support the final campaign to push the Germans into the Po Valley and out of Italy. Among them was the Japanese American 442nd Regimental Combat Team that was moved from France.

Throughout April the struggle continued, but the Germans were finally flushed out of the Apennines into the Po Valley on April 20–24, where they were surrounded on three sides by Allied forces. The latter took Verona on April 26 and advanced quickly to the Adige Line, the last German line of defense north of the Po River before the Alps. All possible escape routes to the passes were sealed. By bits and pieces, the remaining German units surrendered to the Allied commanders, culminating with the final capitulation on May 2. The next day, at a formal meeting, the top German commander in the area, Gen. Fridolin von Senger und Etterlin, formally surrendered the German forces to Gen. Clark of Fifteenth Army Group, ending the war in Italy.[26]

A regrettable caveat to the foregoing summary, the Americans of Japanese descent fought for their country in the European theater while their families were illegally removed from their homes and interned in tarpaper shack work camps in the deserts of the western United States.[27]

In conclusion,

> The combat in the northern Apennines demonstrated the valor, courage, resilience, and determination of the average Allied soldier. The compartmentalized terrain put a premium on small unit leadership and the fighting spirit of the individual soldier. Battling over treacherous ground, often in rainy weather with mist or fog, against an often unseen, highly motivated, and determined enemy, the Allied troops persevered. Their effort and their survival as an effective fighting force during the winter of 1944-45 set the scene for the breakthrough and rapid advances which were to take place in the Po Valley in the spring of 1945.[28]

This afternoon, I saw Bob Hope in "The Princess and the Pirate" at The Little Theatre. It was really quite funny, if a little bit on the ridiculous

side! Anyhow, it was good for a bit of relaxation! This evening, I played a little baseball before it got dark, around 8:00. Then, we got down to the real business of the day, which was that of making egg sandwiches + cinnamon toast. I'm rather tired tonight; so I don't believe I'll bother to disguise my feelings. Rather than try to poke my eyelids open, I shall close this letter and go to bed. (4/12/45)

In scanning my blurry eyes about, I noticed that the flag was only ½ way up the mast

I can well imagine the state of affairs + what everyone is wondering about, back home, now that Roosevelt has passed away! It was quite a shock, wasn't it? This morning I woke up + peeked out of the window beside my bed, to see if it was raining or not. In scanning my blurry eyes about, I noticed that the flag was only ½ way up the mast. "Well," I decided, "those hammer-heads must have knotted up the ropes + it got stuck." With that, I rolled over + went back to sleep!

A little while later, I awoke again and looked out the window. I noticed the flag this time, I thought, "It couldn't be that the Group CO or someone...No, it couldn't be that!" Then someone came in + informed us of the news! Well, it's too bad, for his diplomatic talents will be missed in dealing with Russia, France, etc. when the war ends. Other than that, I don't believe that his death should have too much to do with the war's progress!

This afternoon, I celebrated our 6 months overseas by attending a British movie at the Ensa Theatre. It was exactly 6 months ago, today, on Friday the 13th of October, Betty's birthday, that we boarded ship at Hampton Roads + were officially "overseas." So, as of tonight, I am entitled to wear one gold bar on my sleeve, for 6 months' service overseas! Of course it would look ridiculously insignificant; so, I shall not bother to wear it at all! (4/13/45)

Today, I was scheduled to fly; but, as soon as we got off the ground we had some difficulties. First, the gas tank cover was left off the No. 2 engine tank, so gasoline was pouring off the wing! Then, we had a short

circuit in the electrical system to the extent that a switch panel caught fire + smoked up the cockpit. Although we were in the squadron lead plane, we had to turn around + land, 20 minutes after takeoff! Then, they found that much of the wiring in the plane was ruined, and we couldn't takeoff and join the formation again. So, we missed a nice easy mission to northern Italy!

After that, I went to mass at 11:00, where Fr. Musch said some special prayers for the president!

It looks like most of our work, now, will be in support of the infantry in northern Italy. At least, that's what has been going on for the past two weeks. (4/15/45)

MISSION #27 – BOLOGNA AREA – APRIL 16

On April 16, the 15th Air Force once again sent a maximum effort of all bombers in commission to parade the 200 miles up the Adriatic and over the Po valley with full loads of Daisy Cutter cluster bombs. Even without any knowledge of the progress of the ground forces, one got the feeling that the big push by the Army was close at hand. There was considerable anti-aircraft response as the planes paraded up the valley and carpeted the area with the Daisy Cutter fragmentation bombs. Once again, it was exciting because we felt that we were coordinating with the Army. There was one giant cloud of smoke and dust as the bombs hit, apparently inflicting the necessary damage to this last support of the German armies, to stymie any effort they might have to make resistance. And, of course, I still wondered if brother Bob was still in the field hospital, at Pistoia.

As it turns out, 5 days after this mission, the 5th Army, lead by the 10th Mountain Division made the break-through out of the Apennines and into the valley. It then became a runaway as the Germans surrendered on April 25, 1945. According to tell, General Wolf, the leader of the German armies in southern Europe ran out of gas in his vehicle, en route to meet the American generals to effect the surrender. (G.H.N., 1991)[29]

Thus, once again, I passed over Bob's head

Well, we flew up to northern Italy again today, or should I say as usual. For, it seems that the 15th Air Force has little more to do, now but serve as a tactical air force, in support of the 5th + 8th armies in northern Italy. All of the strategic targets, up in Austria and Germany are now either no longer strategic to the German cause or they have fallen into the Allied hands. Linz is the last "big" target which is in the 15th category. Linz is now in the path of the Russians who have advanced well beyond Vienna, so, in all probability, we'll not have to visit the thriving industrial area of that Danube River town!

As we look at it, the heavy bombers will bomb German emplacements in northern Italy, until it is no longer practical to send a force of heavy bombers after the targets which remain. You see, many targets can only be attacked by low level, medium bombers + fighters! Then, the various groups which comprise the 15th will be segregated + sent either to the C.B.I. [China-Burma-India] theater or back to the states for additional training in other planes. At any rate, the day is not too far away when the 15th Air Force will be evacuated from Italy.

In the meantime, this morning's mission was to attack a German supply dump, located southwest of Bologna, towards which both the 5th + 8th armies are pushing. On these missions, we open the bomb doors over the ocean, so that any bomb-rack malfunctions that may happen will occur there + not over the Italian civilians or American soldiers.

Today, our course brought us over Rome, to the other side of Italy from which we usually go! So, we opened the doors over the water, northwest of Rome, + started up across Leghorn, Pisa + Pistoia towards the lines. Thus, once again, I passed over Bob's head. Only, this time Pistoia was the "I.P." for the bomb-run + we passed over Bob's hospital with 20-250 lb. bombs staring him in the face, only he probably couldn't see the bombs or the planes either!

From Pistoia, we proceeded up over the lines. So precise does target identification have to be in order to bomb from 20,000 feet, just 3 miles from the lines, that the ground forces have all sorts of indicators + markings to direct us towards the target. One of them today was a line

of anti-aircraft shells bursting at 12,000 feet, outlining the front lines. They also had red + white smoke pots on the ground.

Bombing near your own lines is ticklish business

As it happened, today, there was a buildup of clouds which had not been expected, on the northern slopes of the mountains, in the Po Valley. So, we got 1 minute from bombs away when it was certain that we couldn't bomb visually; so, everyone turned off the bomb –run, closed their bomb doors + headed back across the lines! You see, bombing near your own lines is ticklish business, as it is, without attempting the often inaccurate procedure of bombing by instruments!

On the way home, I helped to complete my "Cooks tour" of Italy by seeing Rome + the Leaning Tower at Pisa! Rome with the Tiber River flowing through it, is very beautiful from the air. Today, I was able to pick out the Vatican + the old Coliseum! I sure hope I can get to see it all, soon!

So, everyone who was scheduled to bomb the same target as the 97th brought all their bombs back + landed with them – quite an unusual but not uncommon a procedure. There once was a time when they'd never think of landing a B-17 with a full bomb load. Now, they think nothing of it. Of course, B-24s are a different story again. The best way to land in a B-24, without bombs even, is to jump out in a parachute.

I received your letter of April 9, along with one from Barbara, today! Evidently, Eddie Sullivan is giving his mother quite a line of baloney! There's no telling what he is. However, he's done well to finish his missions; for, the 8th gets some rough targets: Leipzig, Leuna, Magdeburg, etc.! (4/16/45)

(See Appendix I-27)

I received a letter from Randy Martin, today...he is in England and he is now on B-17s

Well, I received a letter from Randy Martin, today. Anyway, he is in England + he is now on B-17s + not any longer on B-24s! For that, I am glad. I shall have to write to him soon!

By the way, I got a mattress, today. They have only a few in the squadron and, I have been over 5 months in securing one of them. But, I am not too sure that the mattress will be too great an improvement over my pad of blankets + the sleeping bag.

Oh yes! I got a call through to the hospital, last night + Bob is doing well + he has no temperature, according to whomever answered the phone. Please don't mention to Bob that I sent his "bitter" letter to you! But, I felt that you should know how he still believes it best not to tell the folks at home what is going on! (4/18/45)

MISSION #28 – RATTENBERG, AUSTRIA –APRIL 19

As the army moved up for the "kill" on the southern elements of the German armies, the authorities wanted to be certain that any and all supply routes were cut off. I guess, you would say, that they may have used a dart board to select this target, a bridge in a small city, south of Innsbruck, at the northern end of the Brenner Pass. This was primarily a railroad bridge, located in a very scenic area, near some of the beautiful Austrian ski resorts. This time, the bridge was destroyed.

Rattenberg turned out to be the last mission our crew flew in WWII. For early in May, the war ended in northern Europe, marked by the surrender of the Germans, near Berlin. This was called "V.E." Day, Victory in Europe Day. (G.H.N., 1991)[30]

As we crossed the rich delta land which stretches between the Alps and the Adriatic, I could see formation which aggregated 300 planes

Today, we went over the Alps, for the first time in about 2 weeks. It seemed like we went on a long, long haul in comparison to our recent trips to northern Italy! In reality, though, we just barely crossed the Alps + the target was right in the heart of the area where rumors have it that Adolf + his gang intend to hide out. The Air Force went out in a maximum effort to various rail + bridge targets on the Austria-Italy supply line!

Our particular target was a bridge, 30 miles east of Innsbruck, on the Innsbruck-Salzburg line. The thing which impressed me most today was seeing the greatest wave of bombers I have ever seen in one area, just as we crossed the Italian basin which lies between the Alps + the Adriatic, in northern Italy. As we crossed the rich delta land which stretches between the Alps and the Adriatic, I could see formations which aggregated 300 planes, without even twisting my head. And, they were only a few of the total amount. There were so many formations on their missions that they kept crossing + re-crossing one another's course, a very impressive sight!

Another thing which impressed me today was the comparative warmth of the airplane we had although the outside air temperature was about 30o below zero. The particular plane I was in was so warm that we had the windows in the cockpit part way open. You can believe it or not. But, with all our clothing, etc. which we have to wear, we had to open the windows, automobile style, or else roast to death!!! You wouldn't believe that we'd be flying high over the Alps with the windows open, for, you don't ordinarily open the windows in an airplane. Actually, having the windows in the plane open is similar to leaving the kitchen window open during a hurricane! We even had to bear the shrill whistling of the wind, in order to get the air. Every time we had to listen to the radio, we shut the windows!

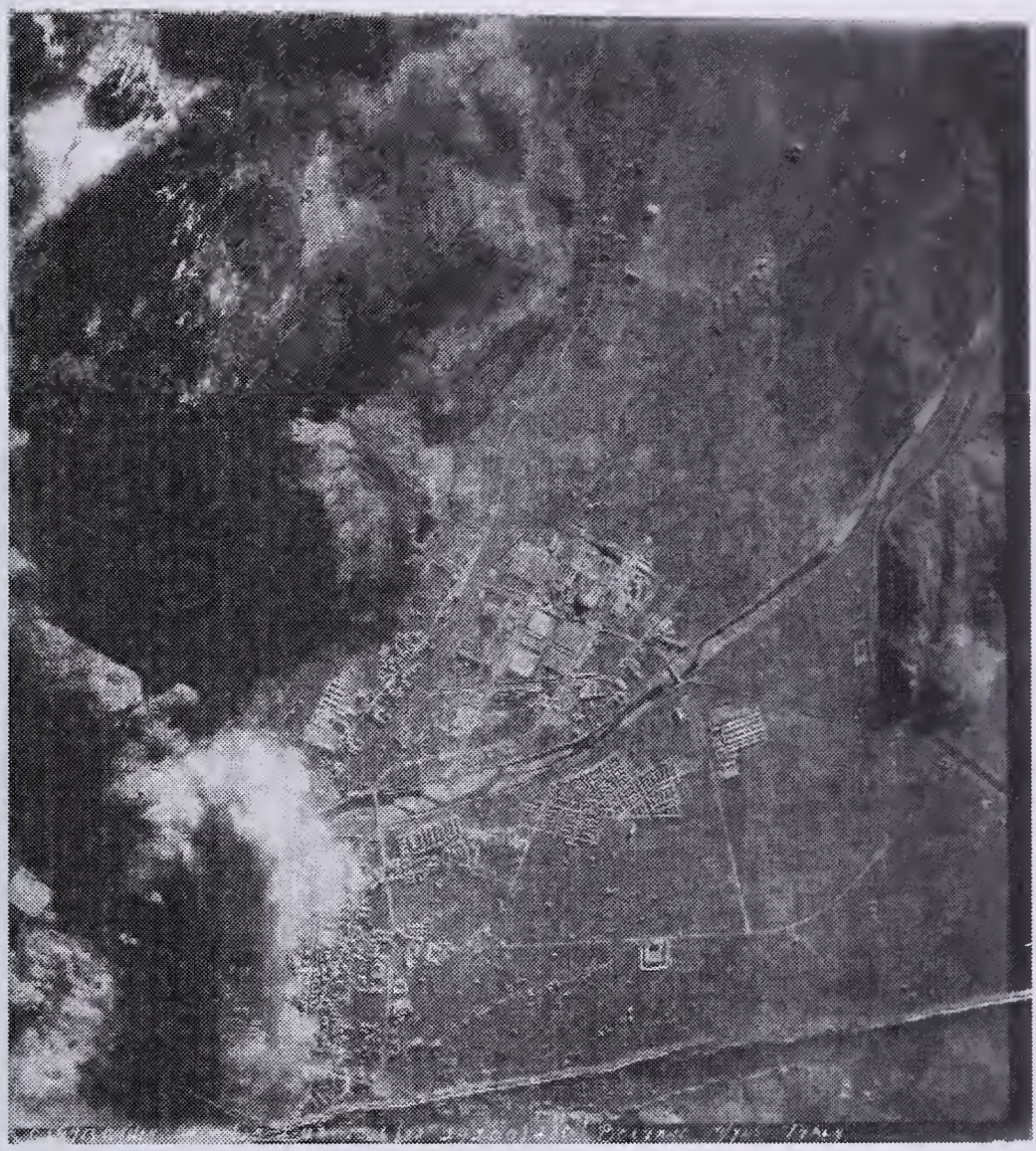
Tonight, I went to Foggia + saw "Hollywood Canteen," at the Flagella. It was a very enjoyable change of atmosphere. (4/19/45)

(See Appendix I-28)

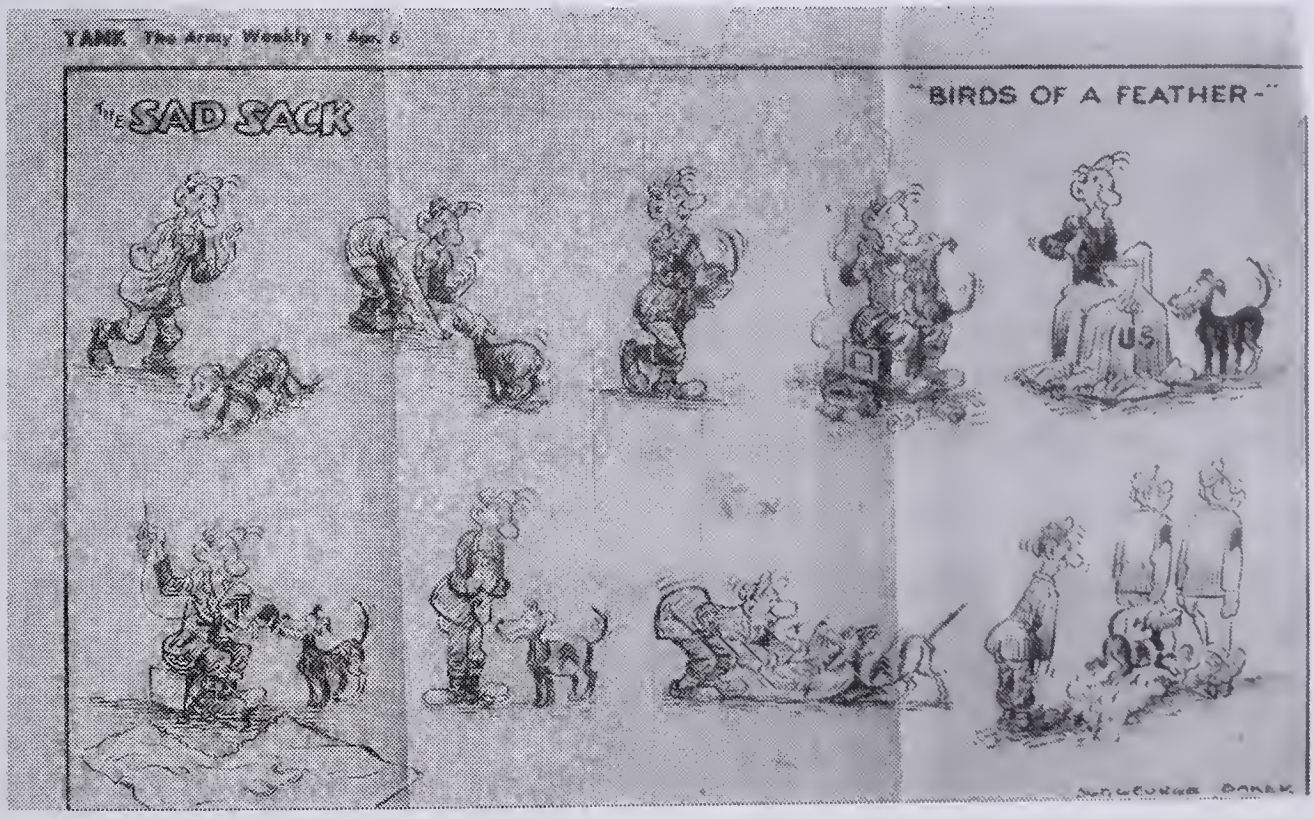
No other letters for the month of April were found in the collection. After Lt. Neilson's last combat mission on April 19, the Fifteenth continued to fly sorties for another week, striking marshaling yards, bridges, and troop concentrations in northern Italy and Austria. The last large-scale mission of the Fifteenth was on April 26. One last bombing mission was flown on *May 1, when twenty-seven Fortresses from the Second BG struck the main station marshaling yards at Salzburg. The mission was unopposed and successful. On the remaining days leading up to the German surrender, the Fifteenth flew

photoreconnaissance, leaflet, and escort missions, but no bombs were dropped.[31]

By the end of April, about all that was left to do was wait to see what Germany would do next, as their fronts were rapidly collapsing and the Battle of Berlin was closing in on the government center. *Mahoney claimed that the last major raid was to Linz, Austria, on April 25, with losses of twelve Liberators and three Fortresses.[32]



Bombing of Bolzano, Northern Italy, 1945



SAD SACK strip from Magazine

Reprinted with permission of Army Weekly

"Die Regierungen Großbritanniens, der Sowjetunion und der Vereinigten Staaten ... wünschen die Wiedererrichtung eines freien und unabhängigen Österreichs...

Rot Weiss Rot

Bei der Schlußabrechnung sind unweigerlich berücksichtigt werden, wieviel Österreich selbst zu seiner Befreiung beigetragen hat." Moskau, November 1943

VERTRIEB: Die R.A.F. und die U.S.A.A.F. NACHRICHTENBLATT FÜR ÖSTERREICH 17. Januar 1945

SOWJETDURCHBRUCH NORDÖSTLICH KRAKAU

LETZTER WIDERSTAND IN BUDAPEST

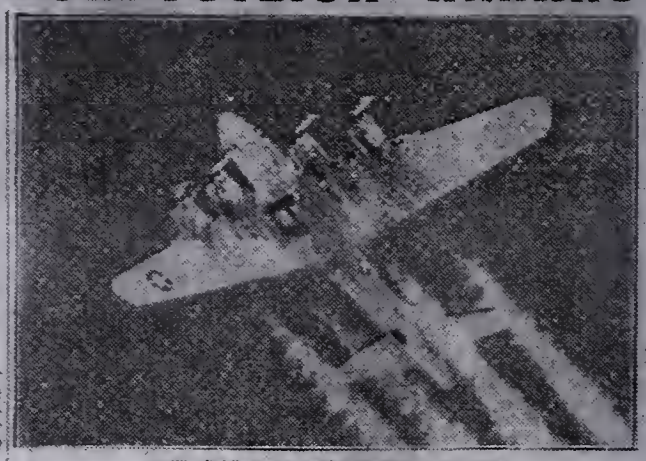
Kieltze und Lutschenetz gefallen

WESTLICH Sandomir sind die Russen aus ihrem Weichselbrückenkopf in 60 km breiter Front durchgebrochen und im ersten Ansturm 70 km tief vorgestossen. In der südlichen Slowakei eroberten die Sowjettruppen den wichtigen deutschen Stützpunkt Lutschenetz und Pleissnitz. Sie haben weiter westlich die Nitra erreicht und die Bahnlinie Komorn-Neuhäusel durchschnitten.

[illegible] dem grossangelegten Vormarsch in Polen kann sich daher ein Zangenangriff gegen die Slowakei entwickeln. Es besteht aber auch die Möglichkeit, dass die Russen, in nordwestlicher Richtung weiter vordringend, Hindenburgoperationen gegen Warschau [illegible] und eine Verlängerung [illegible] sowjetrussischen Südfront [illegible]. In diesem Zusammenhang verdienen die deutschen Meldungen über einen Kesselgroßangriff im Abschnitt Oberpolnische-Schlesien in Gegenrichtung wie als Narew Bedeutung.

In Polen stehen die Russen nach Einnahme der grossen Stadt Kieltze, [illegible] Wodislaw, Widica, [illegible] sowie 600 anderen Städten und Dörfern, 40 km vor Krakau und [illegible] vor der oberschlesischen [illegible]. Sie haben die [illegible] Oberschlesien und die Bahnlinie Krakau-[illegible] durchschnitten. Die deutschen Kampfplätze genommen. Die Verteidiger verloren bisher etwa 10.000 Gefangene und tausende von Toten. Die Sowjettruppen erbeuteten in der Stadt ausser zahlreichem Kriegsmaterial über 7000 Waggons.

Während es wie seinerzeit in Stalingrad, die eingeschlossenen Divisionen nutzlos verbluten, ist gleichfalls wie bei Stalingrad, der westlich von Budapest unternommene Entsatzangriff ausser bedeutungslosen Geländegewinnen nur den Verlust von 15.000 Mann und beinahe 500 Panzern zur Folge gehabt. Ein Teil der bei diesem Versuche eingesetzten Divisionen wurde aus Polen an die ungarische Front geworfen. Dies bedeutet eine Schwächung der Verteidigung Polens und Oberschlesiens unmittelbar vor Beginn der russischen Winteroffensive. Die südlich der Donau stehenden deutschen Truppen sind nun aber auch in der [illegible]



MIT OFFENER BOMBENKAMMER

über Deutschland. Eine amerikanische Fliegende Festung bei Einsatz gegen deutsche Industrie- und Verkehrsziele. Dieses gewaltige Kampfflugzeug ist ein Zwerg im Vergleich zum allerneuesten USA Grossbomber XB19A mit 65 m Flügelspannweite und 18 t Bombenladeeperiebt.

TOTALER MISSERFOLG

SCHWERE DEUTSCHE NIEDERLAGE IN BELGIEN

DAS Ziel des deutschen Angriffs in Belgien war die Gewinnung der Nordseeküste. Lüttich, Namur und Antwerpen sollten erobert werden, Rundstedt, der in einem besonderen Tagesbefehle an seine 35 schlagkräftigen und zeitgemäss ausgerüsteten Divisionen [illegible]

Rot-Weiss-Rot leaflet dropped on Austria near the end of the war calling for a free and independent Austria. Headline reads Soviet Breakthrough northeast of Krakow (Poland)

Chapter 21

End of the War and Return Home

Foggia and Naples, Italy

Checkmate

By mid-April, 1945, 225 divisions of Soviet infantry and twenty-two corps of artillery were positioned on the Oder and Neisse Rivers along the eastern border of Germany, ready for the orders to move on Berlin. Since the previous fall, one Nazi-conquered state after another had surrendered to the onslaught of the Soviet armies from the east. The western Allies were sweeping rapidly through Germany from the west as the various fronts collapsed. The industrial Ruhr District was surrounded, trapping more than 300,000 German troops.

Determined to reach Berlin before the Allies, Stalin ordered the First Belorussian Front commanded by Gen. Georgy Zhukov, and the First Ukrainian Front under Gen. Ivan Konev to move across the Oder and the Neisse, respectively. This massive horde of two million Soviet troops would face three entrenched German defense lines before reaching Berlin. Two hundred thousand German defenders, untrained Volksturm, were ready to meet the Russians with stiff resistance. Fighting was murderous.

On April 20, the Soviets began shelling the region around Berlin with a relentless barrage of artillery fire. The Germans responded by opening dams at upstream reservoirs, flooding the river plain and turning the entire zone into a swamp. As the Soviet storm approached the Berlin suburbs, Hitler, in a meeting with his closest staff, went into a rage. The fuehrer blamed his generals for defeat by the enemy and said he would hold out in his bunker and then kill himself before he was captured.

By April 24, Berlin was surrounded by Zhukov's and Konev's armies. The next day, the Soviet Fifty-Eighth Guard Division met the US Sixty-Ninth Infantry Division on the Elbe River, thus closing the ring on the last viable German units outside Berlin. Soviet forces pushed into the capital with over six thousand tanks and thousands of artillery pieces. There was little interest on the part of the Russians in taking prisoners. Resisting or not, German troops were shot on the spot. The city, having been bombed hundreds of times and mercilessly shelled in the final battle, was a burned-out honeycomb of gutted buildings and exposed basements. Their lack of civility notwithstanding, it is not hard to understand the fury of the Soviets in revenging over twenty million of their citizens killed and 170,000 towns and villages burned to the ground in the German rampage of Hitler's 1941 assault on the Soviet Union.

At dawn on April 30, the Soviets stormed the Reichstag (Parliament). That day, in the subterranean fuehrer bunker fifty feet below the Reich Chancellery, Hitler took a cyanide pill and shot himself in the roof of his mouth. According to Hitler's prior instructions, the fuehrer's body was dragged to the Chancellery gardens, doused with gasoline, and incinerated so that it would not fall into the hands of the conquerors. Eva Braun, his longtime mistress whom he had married the previous day, also took her life by poisoning. Reich propaganda minister Josef Goebbels killed his six children before taking his own life. At 2:00 p.m., two Red Army soldiers hoisted the Soviet flag over the ruin of the Reichstag, seat of Nazi government. The fascist beast had been defeated at last.

On May 2, German General Hans Krebs surrendered the German forces in Berlin to Soviet Gen. Shukov, ending the great last battle of the war in Europe. With the joining of the eastern and western fronts on the Elbe, Hitler dead, and the surrender of Berlin, it was checkmate for Nazi Germany.[1]

The Surrender of Germany and VE Day

Hitler had willed Admiral Karl Doenitz of the navy to succeed him. There was general consensus among the remaining Nazi leadership that the time had come to end the war. For all practical purposes, hostilities ceased by May 2, but a formal surrender required official delegations from each of the major belligerents. Admiral Doenitz's first and last act as head of state was to accomplish the surrender of all German armed forces. Representatives of the Allied powers presented the conditions of capitulation, as had been agreed upon at Yalta. At 2:41 a.m. on May 7, at Supreme Allied Commander Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower's headquarters at Rheims, France, the unconditional surrender of Germany was concluded. The cease-fire was to go into effect one minute before midnight the next day on May 8, 1945, which was designated as VE day. The Nazi leaders were arrested to be tried as war criminals. The long night of terror, the twelve-year scourge of National Socialism and its barbaric rule came at last to an end, leaving behind a land of incomprehensible ruin and untold millions dead.

With the exception of some fighting on the eastern front on the Eighth, the guns fell silent across Europe that day. POW camps came under the command of Allied forces and the long process of repatriating hundreds of thousands of war prisoners began. Germans scrambled to surrender to the western Allies in hope of escaping what was certain to be a long and brutal Soviet imprisonment.[2]

When word reached the men on the front lines, at air bases, and everywhere from Vladivostok to Los Angeles, unbridled celebrations were unleashed. Alcohol was consumed with reckless abandon by the war-weary troops. Guns were fired in the air. At home there was dancing in the streets with spontaneous expressions of affection between complete strangers.[3] On May 9, a parade was held in Moscow. The tensions, the pains, the agonies of six long years were unshackled as Nazi Germany was finally vanquished.

In the wake of the Second World War were some sixty million dead, countless wounded and homeless, and millions of refugees. The full measure, the total scope of the devastation of World War II will never be known. The road ahead would be difficult for the conquerors as well as the conquered. Germany and much of Europe lay in ruins. Millions were starving, cowering in cellars and caves. People stayed wherever there was a fragment of shelter, subsisting on rats and filthy water. Masses of ethnic Germans were on the move in the eastern regions of the defunct Reich, having been expelled by their new masters. Germany's former eastern provinces were ceded to Poland, and the Soviets swallowed East Prussia. The aftermath of these land grabs was one of the largest human migrations in history.

For the Allies, animosity with their wartime cohort, the Soviet Union, arose almost before the ink on the surrender instrument had dried, portending a forty-four-year international standoff known as the Cold War. But for the men and women in uniform, at least in Europe, there was no holding back their emotions, for victory was theirs and well deserved.[4]

On or about April 29, Italian partisans caught the former Fascist dictator of Italy, Benito Mussolini, attempting to escape to Switzerland in a German convoy near Lake Como. The Italians took the loathed Duce (leader) who had led them into war in the Axis camp, killed him, and took his body to Milan. In the same city where the Italian Fascist movement had been founded in 1919, they displayed the corpses of Mussolini and his mistress, Clara Petacci, along with some twelve other Fascist leaders. The bodies were hung upside down in a public square. Police were unable to hold back the enraged citizens, who swarmed the grisly scene where the throng attacked and at least one person fired shots into the corpse of the once arrogant imperial dictator. Following that, a struggle ensued over the possession of Mussolini's body, it having acquired almost sacred importance to his followers, while his opponents were determined not to allow it to be idolized.[5]

BENITO MUSSOLINI – DEATH OF A TYRANICAL DICTATOR

Mussolini was the dictator of Italy. Early in the war, Hitler "put his strong military arms around him" and enveloped his country and his military organizations as part of the Nazi Alliance, known as Axis powers. By the time I was in the combat zone, the Italians had been reduced to small elements of the Nazi organization; so, we did not see or hear anything of Mussolini or the Italian forces.

Sometime during the conflict, Mussolini had abandoned his family and took up with a mistress, called Clara Petacci. At the end of the war, he was living in a villa near the beautiful northern Italy Lago Maggiorre area, a resort area. About 3 days after the truce in Italy, local Italians shot and killed both Mussolini and his mistress, Clara, and hung them on a cross-like yard arm in a public square to be widely seen and photographed. (G.H.N., 1991)[6]

For George Neilson and the airmen of the Fifteenth Air Force, a certain feeling of malaise settled in. Fifteenth Commander Nathan Twinning and European Allied Air Commander Gen. Spaatz in London had on April 16 declared the Strategic Air War won and congratulated the brave men for a job well done. Whatever happened after that announcement seemed anticlimactic. Gone was George's eagerness to fly missions.

In the nose, there was a bombardier sleeping and a navigator stretched across the navigator's table reading a pocket book mystery

Yes, it is certainly nice to be having it easy, nowadays! Today, I flew 2 ½ hours, to bring my total flying time up to 4 hours for the month. 4 hours is all I need to collect flying pay for the month; and, I don't care if I don't fly again this month. I've had enough for a while! I'd just as soon sit on the ground for a while.

I had an instrument proficiency check, today, the first one I've had since I passed my test at Blytheville. Because they want to make certain that everyone gets his flying pay, every plane that goes up will have a

complete combat crew. So, while today's flight required only 2 of us, we had 13 men aboard, most of them doing nothing!

After I completed my turn of flying the radio range on instruments, I started playing with the upper gun turret which is behind the pilot seat! I had a great time spinning around + "aiming" at other passing planes with the double guns. Back in the radio room, there were 6 enlisted men involved in a heat[ed] dice game, and they were rolling the dice against the emergency bailout radio kit! In the nose, there was a bombardier sleeping + a navigator stretched across the navigator's table reading a pocket book mystery. So it went! A good time was had by all. That is the way we should fly all the time. This combat flying is no good – honest! Today, it felt like heaven to be free from the nervous strain. All we did was enjoy ourselves, even though we were supposed to be demonstrating our instrument ability. You see, it is not quite like cadets! Over here, you don't have to worry about not making the grade! As long as you don't make bone-head flying mistakes, everything generally comes out okay!

The weather continues to be just perfect, and all the fields are filled with flowers

Of course, there is still nothing new about what is to become of us. Yet, there are all kinds of rumors coming out, hourly! It is certainly wonderful to read the papers + see how the Germans have admitted that they are utterly + completely defeated! What could be better! Ma, you've probably heard about the terrible atrocities that were committed at the German prison camps of Buchenwald + Dachau! Now, I don't know whether or not they'll allow you to see these pictures + stories, for they are still debating whether or not to show them to the people in the states. Now, if they become available + if occasion arises for you to see them, I want you not to go out of your way to see them or hear any of the stories. Please, I beg of you to ignore any + all stories in regards to the German Prison Camps.

Tonight, I went to Foggia + saw a very good picture, "Strike Up the Band," with Judy Garland + Mickey Rooney. It was a very good picture, even though it was very old.

Meanwhile, the weather continues to be just perfect, + all the fields are filled with flowers. I'm going to try to "live" a little bit, now, if I can. (5/5/45)

Tillman[7] wrote of the waning days in the ETO as "the twilight between war and peace." When the missions stopped and rumors flew, the men knew the war would be over soon, and when the surrender was announced, they did not feel as they expected to feel.

> The closer they got to the announcement that the war was over, the less everyone felt like they thought they would feel. It wasn't sadness, but they were not happy either. They didn't quite know how to feel; emotions kept changing inside them, in turmoil and confusion. Everyone thought he knew how he should feel, but admitted he didn't always feel that way.[8]

One colonel made a decision on one of the last bombing sorties, knowing that the war was all but over, to drop his bombs in a field rather than on the rail depot that was their target. It revealed the humanity of such men, the desire to overcome hate and eschew vengeance. The work turned from destruction to dropping supplies in Yugoslavia and beyond, rescuing POWs, and reconnaissance.[9]

Every group of bombers and fighters had what you'd call an aerial parade over Allied Headquarters in Caserta

Today, I learned that I am scheduled to go to the Rome Rest Camp on Friday. It seems rather coincidental that I should get on it, today; because I was on my way to operations in search of a pass to go see the country, when I saw my name on the board. That means that I'll get to spend 5 days in the Eternal City, see the Pope, get some mementos for you folks, etc. I am

looking forward in great earnest to seeing Rome. So, that should provide a source of deviation from the monotonous atmosphere around here!

Well, it appears that "VE" day is now just around the corner. I don't see any reason why it should not be a day of celebration + pleasure for you folks, because all of us will be free from war, even though we may not be home! All you should think, now, is that we are in "Europe on a tour."

This morning, the boys were just a trifle "teed off." It seems that they had to get up at 4:30 for a practice mission. The scheme was that the entire air force was supposed to be in the air, for the last time as a unit! So, every group of bombers + fighters had what you'd call an aerial parade over Allied Headquarters in Caserta (just outside Naples). It was either in celebration of the peace or perhaps they wanted to show our aerial power to a German delegation there. (Caserta is where the first surrender was signed). Those who flew said that they passed over Naples, Caserta + even Capri, at only 5,000 feet.

Foster + Dunn flew + they said that they were given a regular combat mission briefing. Foster said that the flak at Caserta was supposed to be "Beaucoup." And, Dunn said that the enemy could have been expected to put up some 200 fighters in the Naples area! However, they encountered neither flak nor fighters! Anything for a joke, I guess! I didn't see the entire air force, but it must look mighty impressive, judging by what I saw in the Bologna raids.

About sending packages, you can advise Kay that I don't need anything at present. However, a stray box of candy if there happens to be an excess, would not go to "seed." From now on, I'll be looking forward to coming home, so that'll be sufficient, should the food situation get short again! Remember, it may be a couple of months before I get home. So, don't be building up false hopes. I'll give you the straight information as it comes to me. (5/6/45)

Fini la guerre

FINI LA GUERRE! Well, it's all over in Europe, isn't it? Thank God! Everyone in the area is drunk, tonight, almost. They're shooting flares from all angles, + even the bells of Foggia have been tolling away all evening. Isn't it a grand and glorious occasion! The greatest + bloodiest of

all wars has come to a grand conclusion! But, what is more, the good Lord has seen fit to spare our family, thus far!

Of course, the air war has been over for a week, so the "VE" affair is anti-climactic. However, emotion is rampant + everyone seems to have lost his head! Can you blame them?

This afternoon, I bathed in the invigorating + clear waters of the Adriatic, for the first time! I went with a large group from the squadron, to Manfredonia, where the group has a nice club! The water was wonderful, just right, and it felt great to get into salt water + bask on the sands of a beach! I felt like a free + privileged man. I also collected some sun-coloring, not too much though!

From now on, as long as I have to stay in Italy, I plan to make it one continuous round of entertainment, as much as possible! I've had enough of this worrying + sweating! There's not anything to do in Foggia; but, I'm going to make up for things in Rome, somehow! Of course, it is a grand + glorious feeling to hear that the Germans have surrendered, but, deep down, I take it as just another event in this crazy world. "So, the Germans have surrendered; what next?" For some reason, nobody seems too excited around here, of their own accord! It is only that they feel that they should be excited. It is the boys on the front lines who really should be celebrating! If somebody had not been the ringleader of a celebration of singing, hollering, etc., I don't believe that anyone in the Air Force, here, would know or care about the peace! It is very strange, the mental outlook that we acquire about the war! It becomes so matter of fact that the peace seems like it was bound to come.

Well, there's nothing more to say, during this emotional relief + pause in the strife of war except, Thank God for all he has done for us! I think that God has rewarded your faithful guardianship, Ma, in keeping us safe. (5/7/45)

The great, long sandy stretch was jammed with British and American soldiers

This morning, some of the boys who have not flown this month had a little ferrying job to do. They brought 6 plane loads of ground personnel from one of the fighter outfits down to Naples, where they will leave for

home. It seems that many men who are ground personnel + who have been overseas for 2 or 3 years are being sent home as quickly as possible, which is only fair. Many of the men who have been in charge of maintenance on the airplanes have been indispensable because of their long experience + they have not had a chance to get home. So, it is good that they be relieved first!

This afternoon, the beach at Manfredonia looked like Revere or Lynn Beach on the 4th of July. The great, long sandy stretch was jammed with British + American soldiers who were trucked down from the various bases in the Foggia valley! There were even a couple of generals swimming!

Meanwhile, I can't wait to get started in the "Battle of Rome." I hope that will serve the purpose of stimulating my stagnant thinking process + provide me with some education + amusement alike.

So, there's nothing more to add, except that I hope your mind will be completely at ease, now that victory has been won, in Europe. Let's not anticipate the future. I have a suspicion that the war may end before I get to the Pacific. I'm not going to worry about it, anyhow.

P.S. Foster made 1st Lt. today! (5/9/45)

VISIT TO ROME – VISIT WITH POPE PIUS XII

Shortly after the war ended, there had been no celebrations, only relief, in our tent city of the 340th Bomb Squadron. It became easy to get passes to visit cities and sight-see, as everyone waited, after "V.E." Day, to learn what they had next for us. Obviously, we all expected to be re-assigned to duty in the Pacific Theater of Operations, to deal with the Japanese.

So, a group of us went to Rome, to see the historic sights. This [was] not our crew, travelling as a group, but rather it was a group of American military personnel visiting Rome, or any city in Italy. At the end of the war, we were treated very well; so, it was pleasant. There [were] always a few American servicemen who drank too much or who became rambunctious and acted disgracefully. These fellows never worried about the reputation they were creating acting like conquering heroes.

Anyhow, we got to see all the beautiful old basilicas, St. Mary's, St. Johns Lateran, etc. and, of course St. Peter's. There were always tour guides to fill us in on the details of the history, the architecture, etc. The Sistine Chapel at the Vatican was amazing to see the beautiful sculptures of Michelangelo and the portraits by the famous painters who lay on their backs to paint the descriptive scenes of Christ's life on the ceiling of the Sistine chapel. We also saw the catacombs, really underground graveyards where the famous amongst the ancients were buried. The renowned Coliseum reminded you of what was thought of as a big stadium, hundreds of years ago; but, today, it is not much more than large walls of old, worn out granite, in really what you would call a small stadium, these days. As you will recall, the sport that was the drawing card, then, involved gladiators challenging wild animals. Sometimes, the animals won and killed the gladiators, which brought the same delight, then, that boxing and bull fighting brings now-a-days.

Naturally, the biggest thrill of the visit to Rome was seeing the Pope. Pope Pius XII was supposedly a very saintly man who was remote and carried the weight of the war-time problems heavily in his mind. He was not publicly colorful as others we have known who have succeeded him. But, he did grant audiences every day during the war, for servicemen only, including all nationalities.

As all the servicemen lined up at the altar railing at the main altar in St. Peters, the Pope walked along and greeted all, shaking hands with as many as he could. It was a lifelong memory for me when he came to me and said, "Hello, where do you come from?" I said, "Boston." He said, "Do you know Bishop Spellman?" I said, "Yes, he confirmed me." He smiled and gave me his blessing. Pope Pius XII was probably 65, then. But, he was generally interested, gentle, and smilingly pleasant. Bishop Spellman later became Cardinal of the New York Diocese.

Another life-long highlight of the visit to Rome was attending the Opera House, twice, to see and hear "Il Trovatore" and "William Tell." Servicemen got in inexpensively. At that time, some of the world's finest opera singers worked primarily in Italy, at Rome,

Naples, and the famous La Scala, at Milan. The visit to Rome was, indeed, thrilling. (G.H.N., 1991)[10]

It had been a dream of George's to visit Rome. As a devout Catholic and a student of the world, this trip was undoubtedly the capstone of his tour of duty. He wrote thirty-four pages of letters to Ma and Betty detailing what he did and saw in Rome. He was fascinated by the ancient capital of the continental Roman Empire with its profusion of treasures in art, architecture, and history.

Here I am in the eternal city! I arrived yesterday afternoon from Foggia, after an hour's plane ride! I am in a hotel which is located on "Via Vittorio Veneto," one of the largest streets in Rome. The name of the hotel is the "Regina." It is one of the homes that the army has taken over as a rest-camp facility, in the city. The place is run very much like the Capri rest camp!

My first impression of Rome, of course, was that it is a whole, great city which is untouched by the war. On the way from the airport, I noticed that all the streets are lined with trees, very much like the Jamaican Way, out near *Curley's home!

Now, let me tell you about St. Peter's. Since seeing St. Peter's is my primary objective in coming to Rome, I set about visiting it this morning. In fact, I made a 6 hour walk of it; and, naturally, I didn't begin to see it all. What convinced me to go today was that the Pope was to give his weekly audience, exclusively to Allied soldiers, at 12:30.

We did accomplish the greatest thing that Catholics hope for in their lives

From the dome, people walking through the cathedral look like bugs walking on the floor, beneath. It holds 100,000 people, inside the building. We had a guide to show us the various different things which I could never begin to describe. The Vatican + The Sistine Chapel were closed today; so, I shall have to return for those, but, we did accomplish the greatest thing that Catholics hope for in their lives, when we saw the Pope at 1:15 p.m. The Swiss directed all the Allied soldiers to a large

room, similar to a room in an art gallery + decorated as much with murals, where we awaited his holiness to come + say a few words from his golden throne, mounted upon a red carpeted pedestal, at the front of the room. (5/12/45a)

*Michael James Curley was a controversial Irish-American politician who served four terms as Boston mayor, one term as governor, and one term in the US Congress.[11]

George purchased two sets of Rosary Beads, a chain of beads and medals sacred to Catholics, at an adjacent shop for Ma and Betty. The price he described as "outrageous" but with the elucidation,

I thought that whatever happened, nothing would be as priceless as rosary beads from Rome, blessed by the Pope. Anyhow, I held them in my hands, as the Pope entered the room of Pope Clement VI + bestowed his blessing upon the perhaps 200 soldiers there. As soon as he was seated, he spoke for about 5 minutes, in English, greeting us + extending thanks that the war was over. He had a smile on his face all the time, too. As soon as he finished his brief words, he blessed everyone in the room with their articles, + their families at home.

After speaking, he informally walked in front of the first row of men + shook hands with them, smilingly asking them where they came from. Then, he left smiling, waving + repeating, "Goodbye" 3 times, like someone who was leaving on a train. It all took only 10 minutes, the 10 most treasured minutes of my life, so far! Before his audience, a priest announced that he had to leave immediately after his audience, instead of staying + talking with the boys, as he liked to, because of doctor's orders.

Now, tomorrow is Mother's day, and, if nothing happens, I will attend mass at St. Peter's, in your behalf! I'll be thrilled no end to be able to do that. What a thrilling + wonderful feeling it is to have had audience with the Pope! This photo of the Pope looks exactly like him. I received it from the Swiss Guard, as I entered the room where his audience was held! (5/12/45a)

The next day, Sunday, George went again to St. Peter's and found among the some "forty dozen chapels" a solemn high Mass to attend at the largest altar, which he described as "as wide as *St. Raphael's is long."
*Neilson home parish in Medford, Massachusetts

He had a jeep and was looking for some company to help him tour Rome

Of course, it was a great opportunity + privilege to be able to offer up a solemn high mass at St. Peter's Cathedral, for your intentions, on Mother's Day! Never before was I so proud of being in church.

At dinner, I sat with a gentleman who is a civilian field representative of the Bendix Company, which makes many airplane accessories such as gun turrets, instruments, etc. He had a jeep + was looking for some company to help him tour Rome, this afternoon. What a break for me!!! So, we saw many of the sights, which I'll simply enumerate rather than attempt to describe. I saw the Roman Forum and the adjoining Capitoline hill which used to be the seat of the ancient Roman gov't. Saw the Coliseum, and the Church of St. Peter in Chains, where is located the famous statue of Moses, by Michelangelo. Then I saw the oldest church in Rome, The Pantheon.

Also, I saw the tomb of the great painter Raphael, which is in the Pantheon! Then, I saw the great new stadium which Mussolini built on the outskirts of town. It is now a rest center for the 5th Army. (5/13/45)

The thrilled visitor, seemingly overcome with enthusiasm for the visual feasts before him, attended a rendition of Verdi's *Il Trovatore* at the Royal Opera House. Of the three hour performance George exclaimed:

I couldn't begin to tell you about the splendor + pageantry that surrounded it! I enjoyed every minute of this tragedy-opera, especially the "Anvil Chorus" + the "Miserrere." After that, I returned to the hotel + ate supper. (5/13/45)

George finished the day by stopping at the Red Cross building and calling Bob. The nurse said, "He's up and around but he's still awaiting his operation!" The nurse reassured George that everything was okay and that his brother sounded strong and well. Evidently Bob was preparing to have the colostomy reversed. He closed mentioning the need for sleep to "be ready for another jeep ride tomorrow."

It would take volumes of pages to describe the scenes of beauty and magnificence which I saw today

Once again, I toured the city, with the compliments of my friend who has the amphibious jeep. Starting at 8:00 + continuing until 5:00; we stopped only for dinner. Anyhow, I saw the catacombs of St. Callistus, the tomb of St. Cecilia, the Appian Way, the Aqueduct, the Church of St. Mary Majors, the Cathedral of St. Paul, and the Cathedral of St. John de Lateran, also the Church of the Holy Stairs. It would take volumes of pages to describe the scenes of beauty + magnificence which I saw today. In fact, most of the beauty was far beyond my ability to comprehend. Ma, you'd gasp, too, at the sight of the great masterpieces of Cellini, Michelangelo, Bernini, etc. It is the sight of beauty which I saw today that makes a person realize how thoroughly inadequate his powers of expression really are! I can't begin to find words that would describe a little bit of it!

P.S. Rome has many Austrians from Vienna, who speak splendid English. They are all fearful of their families + properties, + awaiting their chance to return. (5/14/45)

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This footsore + weary boy completed his touring of the Eternal City, yesterday morning by visiting the Sistine Chapel, the Vatican Art Galleries, and the Vatican Library. It is a question of walk, walk, walk if one hopes to see Rome in 5 days. Without the help of the fellow with the jeep, I would not have seen nearly as much as I have already. As it is, I have two sores on my left foot from walking so much in civilian shoes. But, I would not want to miss any of it for anything! (5/16/45)

In a rare moment of candor, George confessed after describing more of the fantastic works of art in the great churches of Rome:

In fact, we saw so many works of art that it becomes boring to the ordinary tourists, such as us. It is all beyond the ordinary person's comprehension. (5/16/45)

On George's last night in Rome, he attended the opera, *La Forze del Destines* (*The Force of Destiny*) by Verdi. He was drawn to it because he noticed on Sunday that Italy's greatest singer, Maria Caniglia, was in the cast along with Beniamino Gigli. Neilson had been impressed when he heard Caniglia sing *The Barber of Seville* in Naples.

Since the war ended I felt a lot better; but, this trip to Rome has been the real tonic

Yes, it is a wonderful feeling to be able to see all the high class scenery + listen to the fine music. Not only did the people applaud after each act, but after each scene Maria Caniglia + Gigli had to do any number from 3 to 6 curtain calls. The more I go to these operas, the more I enjoy them!

This coming to Rome has rested my mind, no end! About the time when I flew the last mission, I was in pretty bad shape, mentally. Of course, since the war ended I felt a lot better; but, this trip to Rome has been the real tonic. You see, it is not hard to imagine that I am living in a hotel in New York, or someplace else in the States. For Rome is a great city + so much of a change from Foggia + the wretched environment of southern Italy. After living in Foggia, this is like living back in the States, for Rome bears no resemblance to the part of Italy which I am used to! As for the modern part of Rome, excepting its religious + historic treasure, it compares with our cities as "just another city" like Nashville, or Tampa, or Montgomery.

We have been getting excellent food at the Hotel Regina, where I am staying. I've had roast beef, steak (good too) and several other good foods which we don't get in Foggia! So, it has been like living as humans do, once again! (5/16/45)

The Guiding Hand of the Almighty

Along George's path from the time of enlistment were blessings that helped him survive. Not only did he survive, but his time was rewarded with adventure. Prayers were answered. From the perspective of the believer, a gracious, loving God watched over the young man while in the service of his country. Examples are abundant. Recognizing the Mississippi River when he was resigned to being lost over Arkansas, an objective flight examiner who saw past bias to keep him in the flight training program, a nurse on a troop ship in the Atlantic who became the key link in meeting with his wounded brother in the Apennine Mountains, the Yugoslav partisans who rescued his crew from crash at sea, a Yank with a Jeep in Rome that made it possible for him to fulfill his dream of seeing the treasures of the ancient city are just a few. With each treacherous turn in the road, the hand of providence carried George across the chasm, the gulf between failure and success, destruction and survival. He was rewarded countless times for placing his faith in that same eternal watchman whom he spoke with in the clouds at 25,000 feet, in the Sistine Chapel, and in his tent in a mud field in southern Italy. Of all the good that Ma Anastasia Neilson had bestowed upon her youngest child, perhaps the greatest gift of all was faith in God.

For Neilson, an audience with the Catholic pope was probably the high point of his overseas tour. It was a triumphant reward for the many months of dedication, mental tension, and sacrifice that he had made as a member of the armed services. This is not to imply that the gallant souls whose mortal lives were extinguished by the heinous monster of war were less faithful, or their prayers less fervent. Indeed, human experience is replete with stories of the faithful perishing from calamities not of their own making. Nevertheless, it is clear to this writer that those who knew their maker did not walk alone in the gargantuan conflict, whether they survived or were taken home to him.

THE WAITING PERIOD – MAY-AUGUST, 1945

After the war ended, they had no routine or program for us. So, they gave us opportunities to fly once every two weeks, sometimes on aircraft gunnery missions, and sometimes on trips to various cities for totally incidental reasons, often described as courier missions. Otherwise, we hung around and talked and visited other groups where we went, in the general area surrounding Foggia, in search of friends or buddies who we had met in the various training stages.

One day, we flew to Marseille, in France, the world center for manufacture and marketing of perfume. We landed at a base called Istre Les Tubes. This was the only place I ever encountered German prisoners who were put to work helping around American bases: running mess halls, guard duty, driving vehicles, etc. I was amazed at the courtesy and discipline that had been drilled into these people.

LESSONS LEARNED – CONVICTIONS SOLIDIFIED

While reflecting on the combat flying experiences and while looking for and running into old acquaintances, it was normal to ask what had happened to "Tom, Dick or Harry," people that you met along the way. Amongst the heart-warming things providing confidence that took me a long way into the "real world" of competitive life, were:

1. The so-called "Hot Pilots" of the training period were not to be heard from. They either "washed out" in training or perhaps had not returned from combat.
2. The fellows who one typically met up with during this waiting period were people who had many missions and some harrowing experiences. They were always concerned over their abilities to do the job and whether or not they could handle emergency situations. All of them had met the test.
3. Fear and discipline were the main ingredients to major accomplishments or recoveries from difficult situations, sometimes referred to as *heroism*.

4. The willingness to meet challenges from unknown job responsibilities where people felt they may not have had "what it takes." It turns out that nobody starts any new experience with "what it takes." Rather, you find what is needed to accomplish previously not known challenges, from within your mind and consciousness.

These ingredients, it seems, provide the basis for most successful ventures into the challenges of life: wife, family, job, social, etc. (G.H.N., 1991)[12]

I will be amongst those who will be allowed to separate and go back

I didn't write yesterday, because after returning from Rome, it was a considerable let-down to get back into this drab environment. Anyhow, there's a lot doing around here. It seems that the group is cutting down to its normal strength of 16 complete crews to each squadron. Now, there are about 25 crews in each squadron.

It so happened that I will be amongst those who will be allowed to separate + go back, unassigned, which I regard as a good break, although it was only by fate! In categorizing us, I was amongst those who had the most missions, of course. Since quite a few had as many as me + only a few of the older ones were to be kept, naturally some had to go! Bear in mind that it has no relation to the number of missions or your rating or ability.

Foster is staying, since he is one of the older navigators. All bombardiers are to be kept, so Dunn is staying, too! Right now, we're trying to decide who is better off! All of those who are going home have nearly all their missions completed, so there you have it. You figure it out!

By the way, I have a total of 73 discharge points, if it made any difference for officers! I also saw my record where I still stand as "excellent." So, I know that I've been doing okay!

I expect that 40 of us officers will transfer to one of the other fields on Monday, to await shipment. Nobody, of course, knows what will happen then. As you must realize, everything is a big muddle over here! But, I expect to move a few miles to the other side of Foggia, on Monday!

We are all pretty confused at present. But, I honestly welcome the chance to get out of this group! (5/18/45)

I received the "Distinguished Flying Cross"

Now, here's a bit of news which I suppose will interest you! This afternoon, a few officers + men from each squadron in the group were called down to the group headquarters, for a decorations ceremony.

I received the "Distinguished Flying Cross!" I suppose that I was put in for it because of the day when we landed at Vis, in the Adriatic, with only one engine working! The Distinguished Flying Cross is one of those "above+ beyond the call of duty" affairs. I forget how the citation reads but part of it says, "Without regard for personal safety, in face of overwhelming opposition," etc. Anyhow, the Wing commander, General Lawrence, was supposed to pin the medals on us. As it was, however, his deputy, a full colonel, performed the brief ceremony.

All it amounted to was having the men stand at attention before a table which they had in a field behind the group headquarters building. As our names were called, each stepped forward + the colonel saluted, pinned the medal on, shook hands, remarked "Congratulations." Then, we wheeled + walked back into place.

The "D.F.C." is a fairly high ranking medal + it carries a $2 per month increase in pay too! In addition, the D.F.C. counts for 5 "discharge points," in case it ever means anything for officers! The D.F.C. is a red, white + blue striped shield, with a beautiful bronze medallion which bears two propellers, in the shape of a cross! I have it + the air medal, which I shall carry home personally, rather than to risk mailing!

*Now, I can give you a resume' of the ribbons + clusters I will be able to wear: I have 3 ribbons as follows:

1. E.T.O. Ribbon – 3 battle stars
    a) Balkan campaign
    b) Air war in southern Germany
    c) Po Valley campaign

2. Air Medal – 2 oak leaf clusters
   a) Medal for 1st 5 sorties
   b) 1st cluster – missions 5-15
   c) 2nd cluster – missions 15-25

3. Distinguished Flying Cross!

In all, then, my combat decorations will amount to 30 points on my service record. As of tomorrow, I will have 3 years of service (from the date I enlisted). So, my grand total of points will be 79. You see, it was to my advantage to enlist in May, 1942, for I received credit for the time while I was on reserve status! Now, just forget my point total, for it means nothing except the curiosity of keeping track of how many I have, in case I would be eligible for discharge! Thus, I'll have a little something to show for my tour of Europe and "da Fogge."

I have your May 17 letter, too, in which you say that you feel much stronger + better, lately! I don't suppose it could be because the war is over, do you? I only hope that I may soon be able to join you in visiting the **Pops! I can hardly wait!

I've got two medals which I can wear on future Memorial days when all the World War II veterans march up to the boneyard + back to the Armory! "I remember the time.... etc.!"

Tomorrow, I expect that those of us who are leaving the group will transfer to the 301st Bomb Group, which serves as a "pool" for those who are leaving the combat organizations for other assignments. Everything will be temporary for a while; so, please don't think of sending things. Remember, too, that I'm not sure I'm coming home, yet. So, I'll keep you posted.

P.S. hate to leave our "home," in a way! (5/24/45)

*A May 19, 1945 340th Bomb Squadron memorandum states that Neilson was also awarded The Balkans Battle Star and the German Campaign.

**The Boston Pops orchestra

Everyone I meet tells of someone who was shot down

Today, I am stationed at the 301st Bomb Group on the opposite side of Foggia from the 97th. All of us who are to leave are here, bag + baggage.

It is a temporary set-up just like Plant Park was! We had to bring our own tents down from the 97th + they are pitched in what you might call a bivouac area, except that we use the mess facilities of the 32nd Squadron of the 301st Bomb Group.

We are only here for the length of time necessary to organize a uniform method of getting us home. It is expected that we will be out of here within a very few days! More than likely, we'll be coming home on one of the many combat weary B-17s that Uncle Sam has on his hands over here. Perhaps 15 men or even 2 full crews of men will leave on one airplane. Anyhow, we'll be leaving here before too long!

Today, it has been like old home week, meeting all the fellows who were at Tyndall Field, Gulfport + then on the boat coming over. It seems that practically all the fellows wo came over with us are going home at the same time! I've been talking all afternoon with different fellows whose acquaintances I've made all along the line! We can't begin to tell one another the experiences we've had. There are too many + they are so vivid that we still get too excited in recalling them!

However, this above all will stay in my recollection of these "post mortems" on the war here: That almost all of our buddies who went down during various missions are alive +well! From the way some of the planes were seen to go down, it seems little short of miraculous! Yet, first one crew + then another reports into its old outfit by mail. Our lead crew which went down over Bolzano were all safe, but for two, and they wrote from Le Havre, where they awaited shipment to the states. Everyone I meet tells of someone who was shot down + has shown up alive + well, since VE Day! That has been the most rejoicing news we've had, over here, at any time!

Well, all the boys are still counting up their battle decorations + hoping that they'll have enough so they'll not leave the states again! I don't really worry about those things. I'm more or less resigned to whatever they decide to do with me, now! That is the only way not to be disappointed in the army!

This evening, I've had a few of those Anna Mack chocolates, which came yesterday; and, I must say that they are extremely nice. There's nothing [better than] good candy, except more good candy, I believe. Well, that's all for now! Thanks for Everything. (5/25/45)

Among the men who were presumed lost but survived was Lt. Glenn Hultquist, one of my father-in-law Floyd Haupt's training crew members who went down shortly after Floyd's arrival in Europe. Floyd learned of Hultquist's safe return when he found the latter's name on a reunion roster forty-eight years after the ill-fated mission. He had been a POW in Germany for nine months.[13]

The May 25, 1945 letter was the last letter that was found in the immense collection of George's letters home to Ma and Betty during World War II. He told the rest of the story in a couple of pages of his late-life memoirs. With the war over, the story takes on a semblance of normalness, predictable and unspectacular. The thousands of pages of letters in the treasure trove preserved for these many years are magnified in interest by the context in which they were written: the most terrible war ever fought on earth.

The story told in the letters is not just the story of one man. It is the story of a generation of men and of women who fought, died, and survived the gargantuan conflagration of the Second World War. Their legacy belongs not just to their families and ancestors but to all Americans and all of the Allied nations whose unprecedented coalition defeated the plague of tyranny that terrorized the world in those fearful years.

EVACUATION FROM FOGGIA TO NAPLES – July, 1945

In July, all the crews remaining in the Foggia area, as well as Army personnel were moved to staging areas, tent cities in the vicinity of Naples. The objective was to have us ready for movement either to the U.S. or to the Pacific Theater of Operations where the war with Japan was very much in motion.

This lead to long periods of sitting around in hot, dusty tent cities. True, we had more access to opportunities to visit and see the sights of southern Italy. For example, we had several opportunities to travel on the famous "Amalfi Dive" which was replete with villas from the aristocracy of Italy, including opportunities to attend the opera and visit the shops and restaurants on the Via Veneto, in

Naples. But, for most of the time, it was boredom and wonderment as to whether we would go to the U.S. or to the Pacific.

At one point, we were asked to signify our intentions to either go back to the U.S., if given the choice, or be assigned to the Pacific. Most of the officers, at this point, figured that they might as well opt to stay in for the duration. (G.H.N., 1991)[14]

From his last combat mission on April 19 until he returned to the United States, Lt. Neilson flew on nine different days. These were practice missions on April 27, 29, and 30 and May 2 and 5, and June 19. On July 18 and 19, he flew transport missions to Cattolica, Italy and back and on August 23 and 24, he flew the transport mission to Marseille, France. No other flights were registered in his Pilot's Log. Though his flying career was not over, the Marseille trip was the last flight of his World War II service stint.[15]

War in the Pacific Rages On

The battle for Okinawa had cost 50,000 US casualties. A week after the island fell to the Allies, all Japanese resistance in the Philippines ended. Following the battles at Iwo Jima, Okinawa, and the Philippines, the next step to victory in the Allied strategy was a land invasion of the four largest home islands of Japan: Shikoku, Kyushu, Honshu, and Hokkaido. This dreadful prospect, of which Okinawa was just a taste, was planned for November 1945. The first wave of landings alone was expected to precipitate one to four million casualties, Japanese and Allied combined.

On July 7, the American Marines and Army captured the island of Saipan through furious fighting that lasted twenty-nine days and left 3,000 US and 30,000 Japanese soldiers dead. Saipan was located 1,200 miles southeast of Tokyo in the Mariana Island group. The island was to be the site of a huge air base that would launch fleets of B-29 Superfortresses to bomb Japanese cities and to support the land invasion that was approaching. But another kind of war was based on Saipan, a war of information to be delivered by a powerful radio broadcasting station and millions

of leaflets that were to be dropped on Japan. This campaign, spearheaded by the Office of War Information (OWI), was to inform the Japanese population of imminent bombing raids and also the present dealings of the Japanese government with respect to continuing the war or surrendering.

July 10, 1945 began a relentless series of one thousand bomber attacks on Japanese cities. These incendiary bomb raids created massive fires that consumed many square miles of wooden buildings in coastal cities such as Tokyo, Kobe, Osaka, and Nagoya. In Tokyo alone, 100,000 perished, several times the number killed in the worst raid on German cities.[16]

It had become clear to US planners that only desperate measures would dislodge the stubborn military elite in Tokyo from its intent to continue the war until the last man. As was the case in Germany, the Japanese militarists were not rational people but demented fanatics who seemed to hate life and love death, who were lost in their own fantasy world of divine destiny. There was no limit to their barbarism, their nefarious corruption, their fiendish resolve to fight on at the expense of their own people.

For weeks, the Allies extended great efforts through the OWI on Saipan to inform the Japanese people of the contingencies in the hopes that they could bring to bear upon their leaders the necessity to end the war and accept the terms laid out for surrender. Essentially, this provided for unconditional surrender of all Japanese armed forces and submission to Allied occupation of the country, as well as a total reconstruction of the government. But it had become clear that only extreme measures would bring the Japanese government to accede to such terms.

By the end of July, the Japanese faced an ultimatum: surrender or witness the total destruction of her cities. How this was to be accomplished was not net revealed.[17]

The Manhattan Project and the Ultimate Weapon

Before 1939, a group of US scientists, many of them refugees from fascist regimes in Europe were concerned over nuclear weapons

research going on in Nazi Germany. In 1940, the US government began funding its own program at the behest of the scientists. It was a joint program between the US Office of Scientific Research and Development and the War Department. The US Army Corps of Engineers was commissioned with heading up construction of massive facilities for the development of an atomic bomb. The highly secret project, named after the Corps of Engineers' Manhattan District, became the Manhattan Project. Its operations were disbursed to many locations in the country, including MIT in Boston, where George Neilson was employed as a lab technician in the metallurgy lab in this activity during the summer of 1942 before entering the AAF. Scientists were commissioned with working on the uranium and plutonium enrichment process. Uranium-235 and Plutonium-239 are very unstable or radioactive isotopes that offered the potential for deriving astronomical amounts of energy through the process of nuclear fission (splitting the atom). The substance of the Manhattan Project was not publicly known until much later. George was not privy to the purpose of the research.

At its project site at Los Alamos, New Mexico, a team led by J. Robert Oppenheimer worked to turn the radioactive materials into a workable atomic bomb. On July 16, the first test of an A-bomb was conducted from a tower in the desert at Alamogordo, New Mexico. The test was frighteningly successful.

The atomic bomb was a controversial weapon, given the magnitude of its power. Even some of the Manhattan Project scientists opposed its use in warfare, as did Secretary of War Henry Stimson, and Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower. However, President Harry Truman and Secretary of State James Byrnes believed it could bring a quick end to the war and thrust the United States into superpower status in the postwar world. As is well known, President Truman, who coined the phrase "the buck stops here," authorized the use of the atomic bomb on a limited basis to demonstrate to the Japanese government the consequences of continuing the war that they had long since lost militarily.

Taking off in a modified B-29 from its base at tiny Tinian Island in the Marianas, pilot Col. Paul Tibbets flew the first atomic

bomb to be deployed in warfare, a 9,000-pound giant nicknamed "Little Boy" containing Uranium-235 to its unsuspecting target in southern Japan. Hiroshima was an industrial city in southern Honshu, home to 350,000 with a large number of military installations and troop marshaling facilities. The skies over the city were clear on the morning of August 6, 1945. At 8:15 a.m., the bomb was dropped by parachute from Enola Gay and detonated as planned at two thousand feet over the city. The explosion was equivalent in force to 12–15,000 tons of TNT. Almost instantly, tens of thousands of people were killed and five square miles in the middle of the city were obliterated. Coal and wood fires from toppled stoves dispelling the morning chill ignited city blocks of wooden houses. The explosion, with such heat as to literally evaporate great structures, shocked the world. Yet Japan did not surrender.

Three days later on August 9, a 10,000-pound plutonium bomb named Fat Man was flown to Kokura with the intent to launch a second atomic attack. However, bad weather over this target saved it. The first alternate was Nagasaki, a shipbuilding port on the southern island of Kyushu. Major Charles Sweeney flew Bockscar, also a B-29 based on Tinian, to deliver the bomb. Due to the hilly topography at Nagasaki, this bomb devastated only 2.5 square miles in a twenty-two-kiloton blast, equivalent to 20,000 pounds of TNT. The second bomb, then, was even more powerful that the uranium bomb dropped on Hiroshima.[18]

The second atomic bombing, tragically, was deemed necessary to demonstrate to the Japanese government that the United States had the capability to continue these cataclysmic attacks if the war continued.

An Internal Struggle, Capitulation, and Peace

In the seats of power in Tokyo, a power struggle was taking place that delayed any movement on surrender. The military authorities, who had ultimate power, wanted to continue the war despite the horrific atomic bombings. The civil leadership, however, wanted to

end the war. The emperor of Japan, Hirohito, was a third element in the tense standoff. He favored surrender to save his people from annihilation. Like Hitler and his henchmen, the militarists seemed to have no concern for the innocent people they led but were concerned only with preserving their pride.

The OWI and these parties were in regular communication as the tense negotiations festered. The stalemate was finally broken by the emperor himself. The Allies had decided to make one concession to the Potsdam conditions. This was to continue to recognize the emperor as the head of state. Hirohito made plans to address the Japanese public, an unprecedented event. Never had a Japanese emperor, holding a position of divinity in the minds of the public, directly addressed his people. He was willing to do this and prepared a recorded broadcast announcing the unconditional surrender. Word of this leaked to the military clique, which then schemed to assassinate Hirohito, seize and destroy the broadcast, and continue the war. Fortunately, the plot was foiled by an informant.

Emperor Hirohito released the broadcast on August 15, 1945, as the citizens of Japan stood entranced while their god-leader spoke. It was a carefully worded speech that, while failing to accept much responsibility for the war, was unequivocal in accepting the terms dictated by the Allies. Hirohito acted to prevent the continued slaughter of innocent people and to lead Japan forward into a grand peace. That day, the fighting in the Pacific and the Second World War came to an end. The formal surrender of the imperial Japanese government was consummated aboard the battleship USS *Missouri* on September 2 in Tokyo Bay. VJ-Day has been ascribed to both August 14 and 15 as well as September 2.[19]

Finally, after *eight long and difficult years of global conflict, the dawn of peace came. World War II was over. Celebrations erupted all over the world with the same fare as on VE-Day. The world had rid itself of two of the most odious regimes ever known on earth. In so doing, mankind, at great and bitter cost in blood and suffering, had decided that tyranny, genocide, and enslavement

did not belong among men. The war did not eliminate all such government, nor did it end all wars. But following World War II was an unprecedented time of global peace, excepting localized wars of independence and ideology. Germany and Japan, with massive investiture of funds through the Marshall Plan, became great democratic nations founded on a strong commitment to pacifism. A world order emerged that divided the nations into two ideological camps that spawned endless vitriolic threats and some regional wars. But the third world war that mankind lived in mortal fear of has, in the seventy years following Rheims and Tokyo Bay, not materialized.

In 1989, the great world schism known as the Cold War experienced a pivotal event, as the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe relented to the incessant cries for freedom from their people. The Iron Curtain, symbolized by the Berlin Wall, was perforated in a short, peaceful revolution that ended the imprisonment of millions of people in their own despotic states in the Soviet sphere. Some said that in that providential fall and winter, precipitated by the opening of East Germany's borders to the West, World War II finally ended.

Near the end of the twentieth century, other changes occurred on the international scene that were once believed impossible by many of those who witnessed them. In 1991, two years after the peaceful revolution in Eastern Europe, Germany was reunited in a peaceful, democratic nation. The following year, the Soviet Union dissolved into twenty independent republics, most on the road to democratic reform. China, once the fearful specter of the so-called Yellow Peril, abandoned hardline Communism in the 1970s and moved rapidly toward economic reform. The communes were shut down and the former state-owned properties sold to the public. By the turn of the new century, China was America's lead trading partner. in 1995 Diplomatic relations were restored between the United States and its one-time enemy, Vietnam. Cuba followed suit in 2014. Though total peace on earth is still elusive, and new forms of horror have reared their heads in the

shape of Islamic extremism, nothing has compared to the global conflagration of the Second World War.

It is a curious irony that one of George's most significant contributions to the defeat of the Axis powers was made before he ever entered the service. His work as an hourly-wage lab technician at MIT was undoubtedly only a miniscule part of the Manhattan Project. Yet it is illustrative of how millions of everyday Americans and their Allied cohorts, doing rather ordinary and small things, brought about one of the nation's greatest achievements, the defeat of the Axis.

*The Japanese invaded China in 1937, eight years before VJ-Day.

THE RETURN TRIP TO THE U.S.

Up until August 12, we had all been assembled into make-shift crews for the purpose of flying home across the ocean in B-17s. As we were gathering our duffle bags and our thoughts, plans got changed as they often do, in the military; and, we were all scattered onto transport planes, operated by the "Air Transport Command" to travel home as passengers. At this point, any contact with our original flight crew at the 340th Bomb Squadron was eliminated.

I flew home on a DC-4, by way of Newfoundland, arriving at LaGuardia Airport, in N.Y. on August 13. On August 14, I was processed through a reception center at Ft. Totten, on an island in N.Y. Harbor, and sent on my way, with a 15 day pass. I got an airplane flight by American Airlines, to Boston; and I arrived home at West Medford on the afternoon of Aug. 14, 1945.

My mother, and sister Betty were pleased to see me. Brother Bill, on duty in France in the Transportation Corps, had not come home; and Bob had already visited at home, with his new wife, Katherine, while on a convalescent leave from Camp Swift, Texas. So, it was very satisfying and joyous to be home after 2 ½ years in a relatively fast track of training and combat bombing missions.

VICTORY IN JAPAN DAY (V.J. DAY)

The very next day [after arriving home] was "V.J. Day," the end of the war with Japan. They had surrendered, as a result of the two Atom Bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. There was, of course, lots to be happy about.

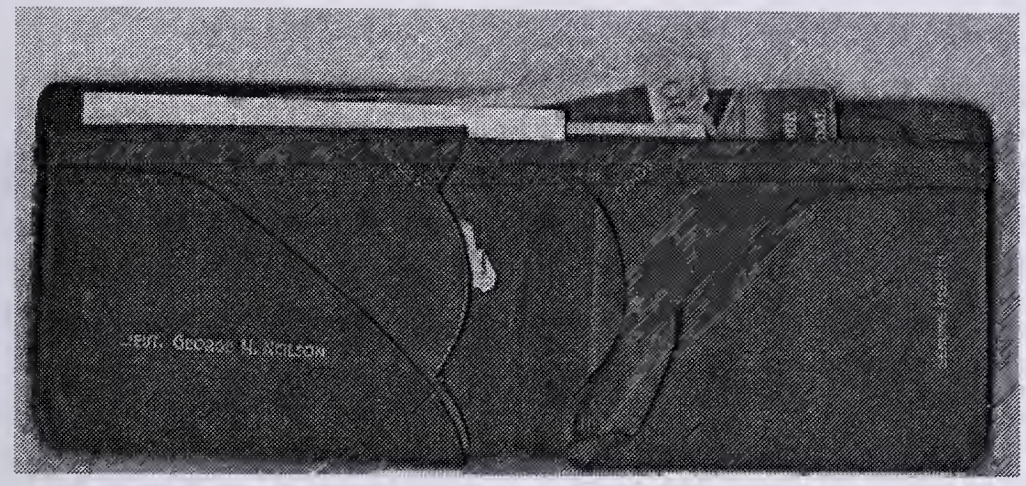
During my 15 day leave, I got "itchy" as to what my future would be. While in Italy, I thought that there might be an opportunity to go to graduate school; so, I began my application process for acceptance during this period. I was aware that most of the expenses would be paid by the *G.I. Benefits Bill for veterans. I recall going over to Harvard with my military uniform as a First Lieutenant. There, I was treated courteously but with a general atmosphere of "put-down" because they indicated that large numbers of military people were applying; and, most of them were Phi Beta Kappa students and captains of their sports teams. So, I left my first interview a bit dejected and wondering where it would all lead. But, I did not despair.

SEPARATION FROM THE AIR CORPS, GREENSBORO, N.C., SEPTEMBER, 1945

At the conclusion of my leave, I reported to Greensboro, to see what would be next in my Air Corps career, hoping that I would be released. I found that they had, suddenly, become desirous of releasing those who had previously signified their desire to get out, promptly. Vividly recalling that, while in Italy, I had recorded that I was desirous of staying in indefinitely, it became critical to get hold of my records and make the change from "yes" to "no," since the end of the war had changed the whole perspective. While worried over being "caught" changing my records, when I did so, nobody got concerned. So, I was processed for release on Sept. 30, 1945, thence into the Air Corps Reserve as a civilian. (G.H.N., 1991)[21]

*Officially the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944[22]

Concurrent with the end of World War II, George Neilson's stint of active duty in the USAAF also came to an end. No record is available of what thoughts went through the young man's mind in this moment of his life. The war was over, and he had served honorably and courageously. Suddenly, it was time to look forward to a vast future. George, like so many others who had served in the cauldron of war, had grown decades through what he had lived through. As most World War II vets, George did not dwell on the war after discharge. He was anxious to make up for lost time and get on with his life.



Wallet given to George by Mr. John
Black of Medford Boat Club

Neilson receives the Distinguished Flying
Cross at a ceremony in Foggia.

Lt. Neilson on R and R at Rome, Italy
afer German Surrender, May, 1945.

SORTIE
FIFTEENTH AIR FORCE
8 May 1945 PRINTED IN ITALY FREE DISTRIBUTION

Victory!

Germany Surrenders All To Gen. Eisenhower

President Harry S. Truman To Announce Terms

A dispatch from SHAEF last night announced that the war in Europe is over. Unconditional surrender took place at 02:41 o'clock yesterday morning at the Little Red School House in Rheims, Germany, which was General Eishenhower's headquarters. Colonel General Gustav Jodl, the new German Army Chief of Staff, signed for Germany. General Bedell Smith, Eisenhower's Chief of Staff, signed for the Supreme Allied Command. General Ivan Susloparoff signed for Russia and General Francois Sevez for France. A CBS broad-

(Continued On Page Four)

The Victor

General Dwight D. Eisenhower

General Twining Lauds Fifteenth For Its Contribution To European Victory

On this historic day, the announcement of the termination of hostilities in Europe, I wish to express to every individual in the United States Fifteenth Army Air Force and the 205 Group of the Royal Air Force my sincere gratitude for the loyal devotion to duty which has contributed materially to this Allied victory.

Our air battles were bitterly fought, and not without cost to us. Our combat men paid for every victory. It is fitting that today we should review our accomplishments.

First, in our strategic plan was the destruction of German aircraft and aircraft production facilities. The control of skies must precede control of the land. This was accomplished by the relentless day and night attacks of our bombers and fighters. We licked the Luftwaffe in the air and on the ground.

Striking at Ploesti on 5 April 1944, we started at the jugular vein of Germany's oil and gasoline supply, the life-blood of the enemy's vast mobile war machine. The full significance of the oil campaign became increasingly evident as the war progressed and Allied land armies forged ahead on all fronts.

Following the fall of Ploesti, we eliminated all remaining gasoline production facilities within our range.

Nearly half the total bomb tonnage dropped by our air force was on enemy lines of communication. The disruption of traffic and destruction of supplies caused by our widespread and persistent attacks contributed greatly to the progress made on the Italian, French and Balkan fronts during the months that followed.

Our bombers and fighters operated in close co-operation with the Allied armies in Italy, France and the Balkans. The 15th contributed greatly to the air operations which broke the German offensive designed to capture Tito and crush the Yugoslav

Major General Nathan F. Twining Praises 15th AAF

(Continued On Page Four)

15th Reviews Its Strategic Contribution To Nazi End

As the world celebrates Victory-in-Europe Day, Major General Nathan F. Twining's Fifteenth Army Air Force proudly reviews the leading roll it has played in over 18 months as a strategic air force, helping to lay the groundwork for the final collapse of the Nazi empire.

Coming as a fitting climax to the continual acknowledgement by the Allied commanders of the part played by strategic bombardment is the admission by Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, who in an interview after his capture stated that "systematic destruction from the air, with the lack of fuel and raw materials, were among the principal reasons for Germany's defeat." Strategic bombardment also accounted for the lack of fuel and raw materials which came to be such a vital issue for continued resistance.

The dramatic crumbling of the German armies on all fronts may temporarily overshadow the endless days and nights, weeks and months of bombing which drained the German war machine and the German nation of their inner will and power to resist. But those months of aerial campaigns against enemy aircraft, both in production and in the air, against rail and communications lines, against armament and munition production, against troop concentrations and defensive positions, and lastly, the continuing campaign against the life blood of the enemy war machine, oil, made possible the utter collapse of an army which the world had viewed at one time as being invincible.

The airmen, those of the 15th AAF and the other air forces engaged in Europe, did not march into the German towns, but their countless sorting down "flak alley" paved the way for the brilliant successes of the men of the ground forces who overran the vaunted "Fortress Europe" of the Nazis.

A direct descendent of the Twelfth Bomber Command, the 15th AAF is the youngest of the Army Air Forces, with the exception of the global Twentieth Air Force. However, several of the heavy bomber and fighter groups are among the oldest to fly combat in the European war.

On 1 November 1943 when the 15th was activated, its present commander was in the South Pacific leading ideas with the Jafs as commanding general of the 13th Air Force. The 15th AAF was to be the southern end of a great aerial offensive team to punch at the underbelly of Europe while the British-based Eighth Air Force was to give the Nazis a headache from across the channel to complete the encirclement.

At the helm of the 15th was Lieutenant General, then a major general, James H. Doolittle, who brought the new organ-

(Continued On Page Four)

German surrender depicted in Sortie, newspaper of the 15th AF.

Chapter 22

Conclusion—Looking Back, Moving Forward

Final Tribute to the Fifteenth Air Force

Perhaps the best way to sum up the contributions that the Fifteenth Air Force contributed to victory over Nazi Germany is to quote here unabridged the words of commanding officer Major General Nathan F. Twinning after the German surrender. This was published in the Fifteenth AF newspaper, *Sortie*.

General Twinning Lauds Fifteenth for its Contribution to European Victory

On this historic day, the announcement of the termination of hostilities in Europe, I wish to express to every individual in the United States Fifteenth Army Air Force and the 205 Group of the Royal Air Force my sincere gratitude for the loyal devotion to duty which has contributed materially to this Allied victory.

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Our bombers and fighters operated in close co-operation with the Allied armies in Italy, France, and the Balkans. The 15th contributed greatly to the air operations which broke the German offensive designed to capture Tito and crush the Yugoslav Partisan movement.

Prior to the invasion of southern France, we conducted an all-out softening up attack on coastal defenses in support of the invasion; and last September, one entire bomb wing was utilized to transport vital supplies to our rapidly advancing forces in the valley of the Upper Rhine.

During the fall of 1944 and this spring, this air force, through its continued bombing of enemy oil installations and communications and powerful air support of Russian advances, contributed greatly to the defeat of Germany.

With the establishment of bases in Russia in June, we closed the circle of strategic bombing around the inner industrial fortress of Germany.

Probably the most satisfying event in the history of our air force occurred last September, when

hundreds of aircrew personnel were returned by 15th AAF bombers to Italian bases from imprisonment in Romania and Bulgaria.

In achieving this victory, the air force has fought air battles ranging from the Pyrenees Mountains to the Black Sea. The attack has been carried to the enemy in 12 countries. From the first bases on the continent of Europe, we hammered home to the enemy the knowledge that no factory, no refinery, no railroad yard, no airfield, or vital bridge of any value to him was safe from Allied Bombing.

To those who paid the ultimate price for victory we pay homage. Their sacrifices must be remembered as we go forward to final victory and a lasting peace. To this end, we dedicate our resources and our lives.[1]

Postscript: Why the Allies Won

Debates will continue indefinitely about what factors contributed most to the defeat of the Axis in Europe. No part of the air, land, and sea operations was unimportant in the final victory, but Miller[2] concluded that the three most crucial factors were 1) The Red Army's campaign in the east, sweeping through the Balkans, Eastern Europe, and culminating in the fall of Berlin, 2) The air war conducted by the combined U.S. Air Forces and the British Bomber Command, and 3) The successful Anglo-American D-Day assault at Normandy. Just as the western Allies defeated German air power, the Soviets must take most of the credit for destroying the Wehrmacht.

Of the 3.1 million German battle deaths up until the end of 1944, eighty-eight percent occurred on the eastern front, according to German historian Ruediger Overmans. Another 2.2 million of the total of 5.3 million total occurred on other fronts and in the battle for the German homeland in 1945. The vast majority of the German and Soviet casualties in the east were ground troops.

Further analyzing the air offensive, the bombing of strategic targets by day-time had a greater effect on bringing down the Third Reich than the terror bombing of German cities at night by the RAF. Interviews of German military leaders tended to be biased based upon whether US or UK personnel were interrogating them, and indeed stories conflicted. Albert Speer, German armaments minister, discredited the effect of terror bombing of cities targeting residential areas.[4]

> In interrogations conducted after the war, German military and government leaders insisted that the spirit of the German people remained unbroken throughout the war. "[You] underestimated ... the powers of resistance of the German people," Albert Speer told RAF interrogators. "Other peoples, as perhaps the Italians, would have certainly collapsed under a similar series of night attacks and would have been unable to undertake further war production, but not the iron-willed Teutonic people," he insisted.[5]

Speer's was a highly biased opinion. As Miller[6] affirms, German morale fluctuated greatly and finally collapsed near the end of the war. But even Arthur Harris, British Bomber Command chief, doubted the true effect of morale bombing. He called it "a counsel of despair" and doubted that any meaningful result would occur.

> As we have seen, he bombed German cities to kill German workers not morale. In killing workers he shattered the infrastructure that sustained their lives – urban power stations, water supplies, streetcar lines, and most importantly, housing, the billets of the citizen soldiers of production. As he famously told his crews before sending them to Berlin, "Tonight you go to the Big City. You have an

opportunity to light a fire in the belly of the enemy and burn his Black Heart out."[7]

In the final analysis, the bombing of oil refineries and synthetic oil plants literally brought the mobilized German juggernaut to a standstill, as a mechanized war cannot go on without fuel. The destruction of marshaling yards had a compounding effect on the German war machine. Not only did the oil war squeeze off the Reich's oil taps, but the rail campaign prevented whatever there was from moving. Furthermore, it made it impossible for the Germans to send troops to areas they were needed in an efficient way. Once the Luftwaffe was defeated, the strategic targets could be demolished with little opposition. As became very clear in the Ardennes campaign in December 1944, the Wehrmacht literally ran out of gas in the last six months of the war.

Notwithstanding this analysis, US air commanders were forced to concede that the so-called precision bombing theory that they were convinced would win the war was to a large degree a myth.[8] High altitude bombing was never especially accurate. It took many missions of hundreds of bombers to take out the strategic targets.

Allied victory was aided indeed by weaknesses within the Third Reich. The German government and military were not always unified, and this fracturing increased as the end neared. Leaders moved in and out of favor with Hitler. The fuehrer's refusal to listen to his general staff with their field experience and expertise in their specialties resulted in many lost opportunities.

Excessive resources devoted to vengeance weapons such as the V-1 and V-2 at the expense of strategic weapons systems was fatal. Similarly, the potential of the turbo jet propelled aircraft for use as a fighter rather than as a bomber was squandered by the misguided insistence of Hitler. Brilliant men such as Rommel, Speer, and Milch were shoved aside or shot because, though they were better informed, challenged someone above them. Reprisals following a failed July, 1944 plot to kill the fuehrer brought about the deaths of many leaders who may have been invaluable in their cause.

In truth, no oversimplification of the causes of victory do justice to the total effort required to bring the pre-war world's most powerful military to the surrender table. It was a combination of all the Allied land, sea, and air forces as well as the underground war that brought about the Axis defeat in Europe.

Fifteenth Air Force Summary

By the armistice, the fifteenth had sent 152,542 bomber sorties (1 sortie = 1 plane, 1 mission) and 89,835 fighter sorties. It destroyed 3,946 enemy aircraft ("victories"), fired 25.1 million rounds of ammunition, and burned 450 million gallons of aviation gasoline. It lost 3,410 aircraft with 14,181 aircraft damaged. Casualties included 2,703 killed in action, 12,359 missing in action, and 2,553 wounded. Bomb tonnage by country was: Italy, 90,914 (29.3 percent); Austria, 74,211 (23.9 percent); Germany, 35,927 (11.6 percent); Romania, 26,364 (8.5 percent); Yugoslavia, 22,012 (7.1 percent); Hungary, 21,933 (7.0 percent); France, 19,014 (6.1 percent); Czechoslovakia, 10,609 (3.4 percent); Greece, 3,226 (0.10 percent); Bulgaria 2,601(0.98 percent); Poland 2,095 (0.06 percent); and Albania, 372 (0.01 percent) A total of 309,278 tons of ordnance was dropped by the Fifteenth on hostile territory.

Bomb tonnage by targets was marshalling yards, 107,538 (34.7 percent); petroleum, 59,923 (19.3 percent); air fields and aircraft factories, 42,207 (13.6 percent); railroads, roads, and bridges, 41.938 (13.5 percent); support of ground forces, 25,657 (8.2 percent); industrial targets, 14,976 (4.8 percent); harbors and shipping, 12,520 (4.0 percent); and unspecified-miscellaneous, 4,519 (1.4 percent).[9]

The Legacy of World War II

On September 2, 1945, at the formal surrender of Japan to the Allied powers aboard the battleship Missouri anchored in Tokyo Bay, general commander of Allied operations in the Pacific theater Douglas MacArthur's words resonate with optimism as war at last

had become so horrifying as to create the hope that there might never again be a World War:

> It is my earnest hope and indeed the hope of all mankind that from this solemn occasion a better world shall emerge out of the blood and carnage of the past—a world dedicated to the dignity of man and the fulfillment of his most cherished wish—for freedom, tolerance and justice.[10]

After the signing, MacArthur addressed the American people by radio:

> Today the guns are silent. A great tragedy has ended. A great victory has been won. The skies no longer rain death – the seas bear only commerce, men everywhere walk upright in the sunlight. The entire world is quietly at peace. The holy mission has been completed. And in reporting this to you, the people, I speak for the thousands of silent lips, forever stilled among the jungles and the beaches and in the deep waters of the Pacific which marked the way. I speak for the unnamed brave millions homeward bound to take up the challenge of that future which they did so much to salvage from the brink of disaster.
>
> As I look back on the long, tortuous trail from those grim days of Bataan and Corregidor, when an entire world lived in fear, when democracy was on the defensive everywhere, when modern civilization trembled in the balance, I thank a merciful God that He has given us the faith, the courage and the power from which to mold victory. We have known the bitterness of defeat and the exultation of triumph, and from both we have learned there can be no turning back. We must go forward to preserve in peace what we won in war.

> A new era is upon us. Even the lesson of victory itself brings with it profound concern, both for our future security and the survival of civilization. The destructiveness of the war potential, through progressive advances in scientific discovery, has in fact now reached a point which revises the traditional concepts of war.
>
> Men since the beginning of time have sought peace. Various methods through the ages have attempted to devise an international process to prevent or settle disputes between nations. From the very start workable methods were found insofar as individual citizens were concerned, but the mechanics of an instrumentality of larger international scope have never been successful. Military alliances, balances of power, leagues of nations, all in turn failed, leaving the only path to be by way of the crucible of war. We have had our last chance. If we do not now devise some greater and more equitable system, Armageddon will be at our door.[11]

Remaining Questions

Was Lt. Neilson a pilot or copilot?

He was both. George became a pilot by military occupational specialty (MOS) when he received his wings at Blytheville. The AAF did not distinguish between pilot and copilot in the military occupation classification system. On Lt. Neilson's separation form in 1945, Form No. 100, under "Military Occupation" he was shown as "Pilot, B-17." The description following this states: "Pilots aircraft and commands crew. Inspects aircraft prior to flight. Must have thorough knowledge of flight and navigation instruments, radio, meteorology, flying regulations, and operation of engines."

On B-17 missions, there were two pilots, one designated as first pilot and one as copilot. These roles were designated as a "crew assignment," subject to change on each mission. For most of his overseas duty, Neilson was the copilot of his crew. Yet the only difference between first pilot and copilot was that of command, not flying duties or skill level. The first pilot was the crew commander for the mission; he had final say as the military authority on the aircraft.

At the combat crew assembly and training center at Tampa, Florida, Neilson was assigned as a copilot on Lt. Thomas Kiefer's crew. The assumption was that, after flying with Kiefer for a time, he would be advanced to first pilot. However, he flew with Kiefer for most of his combat missions. In his letter of 2/21/45, George wrote, "... I log just as much first pilot time on a mission, as any other." Recalling the mission when the crew went in the Adriatic Sea, George referred to Kiefer as "my co-pilot." All things considered, George was an equal with Kiefer in terms of the operation of the aircraft. It is of absolutely no consequence which seat he had in terms of honor, valor, magnitude of his service to his country, and his contributions to the defeat of Germany.

Travis L. Ayres published a book called *The Bomber Boys: Heroes who flew the B-17s in World War II* (New York, New American Library, 2005).[12] The book is composed of five incredible stories of men who experienced horrific near-death episodes on one of their B-17 missions. None of them was a pilot. A heavy bomber mission was a team operation. Each position was crucial to the operation and survival of the aircraft and its crew. Heroism knew no bounds. It wasn't dependent on rank or job or unit. Each man contributed his specific skills.

Tom Kiefer and George Neilson, like most cockpit crews, lived and worked together. They were friends. Kiefer recognized George's superior ability in instrument flying. George was saddened when Kiefer completed his required missions and rotated home, because he preferred to keep flying with Tom rather than be reassigned. Considering that the weather was often more of a threat to the plane than the enemy guns, it was

George's strength as an instrument pilot that allowed the crew to beat the weather. Pilots and copilots on B-17 crews generally shared the flying duties and rotated time at the wheel every fifteen minutes. Perhaps Bowman[13] best neutralizes the pilot versus copilot question, dispelling any notion that the copilot was simply a backup for the first pilot:

> There is no question about the need for a copilot in the B-17. The strength of one man is not sufficient to kick it around in combat. Usually, the copilot will do at least half the flying, but the pilot takes over in actual combat. But even in combat, when the pilot is flying the ship, the copilot should keep his hands on the wheel and his feet on the rudders. In that way he is ready, when needed, to apply pressure in the direction the pilot indicates.

Kiefer and Neilson were an equal partnership when it came to the technical aspects of the aircraft. George's award of the Distinguished Flying Cross for keeping the ship aloft under extremely hazardous conditions should close the question. He was a pilot, one of two required to get the monstrous B-17 fighting machine to the targets and safely back to earth.

How was Lt. Neilson able to convey so much detailed information about his involvement in the war under existing censorship regulations?

By his own admission, he may have pushed the regulations to the limit or beyond at times. Two factors must forestall any judgment of George's actions in this regard. First, he explained in a letter that he understood it was all right to talk about a mission *after* the fact, but he was not to mention any plans for future missions. Second, he only wrote of missions after they occurred.

The rules for what a serviceman was restricted from writing home were explained in US Military Pamphlet 21-1. The rules,

written under the motto "Loose lips sink ships," were pretty clear. Accordingly, they were restricted from writing anything about military operations, movement of troops, ships, aircraft, and so forth. An individual at the unit level was appointed as a censor and would sometimes confiscate a letter or just clip crucial information out. Officers were given more leeway in this realm. They were not censored as much because they were honor-bound to keep the rules. However, they were censored some. Initially, servicemen were not even permitted to tell which theater of the war they were in. Over time the rules loosened up. By the Korean War, censorship of troop correspondence with home was discontinued on the basis that it was not worth the time invested in it.[14]

George made it clear in a letter to Ma and Betty that he intended to keep them informed of what he was doing, ostensibly out of a sense of loyalty to them to keep them from worrying unnecessarily. Obviously he trusted their integrity in this and on many occasions specifically requested that the information not be shared in any way. In any case, he seems to have had torn allegiances in this matter.

Did George suffer long-term effects from his wartime service?

It is a speculative matter. As I have since reflected on Dad's life and the role his wartime service played in it, I wondered if he had been permanently harmed by the terrifying experiences he lived through as a combat pilot. George suffered from night terrors, panic attacks, and anxiety for many years after the war, symptoms that many war veterans have experienced.

Today, it is well known that those who have been in combat (or other situations where life and death are at stake) often suffer psychologically for a protracted period of time following the traumatic experience. Many soldiers who have returned from combat duty exhibit symptoms that include flashbacks, nightmares, social withdrawal, a propensity for violent behavior,

lack of ability to form normal relationships, high anxiety levels, and lack of normal emotional response.[15]

Although combat fatigue was recognized by the US Armed Forces during World War II, it was generally treated as a temporary condition, often by a period of grounding or rest camp. Having studied the effects of combat on veterans of the wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, psychologists identified the symptomology of post-traumatic stress disorder, a condition caused by combat as well as other life experiences of comparable fear and terror. One thing that has been established about PTSD is that symptoms can appear many months and even years after the antecedent experiences. PTSD sufferers may struggle coping with stress (personal interview with Mr. Steve Prater, VA counselor specializing in the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder, June, 2015).

I recently asked a clinical psychologist, having described some of the experiences my father had during the war, if he may have suffered from PTSD. The response was emphatic: "I don't see how he could *not* have." (personal interview with Mr. Jason Cook, clinical psychologist, May, 2015).

So the question remains not *whether* George suffered from PTSD but how much he did. It is not my purpose here to try to speculate upon how the war affected my father in specifics other than to state that his response was common among combat veterans. The character traits he displayed while in the service endured. He remained a good Catholic, a good provider for his family, faithful to his wife, successful in his career, an honest and upright citizen. Yet he was not perfect and had his struggles. He did not smoke or drink other than a glass of wine at dinner. He worked very hard, at times to a fault. He was opinionated, and even combative with his adversaries in business. His oft-repeated philosophy, "Life is a battle," was in reality how he viewed much of his life and the world itself. In some ways, he continued his combat missions for the rest of his life, but instead of fighting Nazi Germany, he battled the things that presented conflict for him.

For all the hardening effects of losing his father at a young age, the Great Depression, and war, there was much in his heart that was sensitive and soft. He loved his wife with tenderness and faithfulness. He doted over his babies, loved animals, and had a roaring laugh that was exceeded only by his thunderous sneeze. He was a good and honest man, a churchgoer, generous, and thoughtful. He wrote letters to his young-adult children and worked hard to provide a good home and college educations for his children. He was a devout Boston and Notre Dame sports fan and prided himself in his backyard roses.

Ironically, and perhaps providentially, the adversity he accepted best, like the war, was his great and last mission, his three-year battle with multiple myeloma cancer that eventually took his life. During this time, Dad became pensive and humble, and we came to know him in a way we had never before. He developed a sensitivity toward life in which the day-to-day troubles didn't seem to matter as much as the big picture. His funeral brought throngs of people from near and far who had considered George a friend. But for all that, his assessment of being "*nervous in the service" was not a joke. Like for so many troops who have served in armed conflict around the world, the war ended for the country but in real ways continued on for George and his millions of compatriots, as long as they lived. This, the crosses at Normandy, the entombed sailors in the rusted ship hulls under Pearl Harbor, the thousands of men missing in action who were never found, and the crowded veteran's hospitals are part of the cost of freedom that we enjoy because of sacrifices of the Greatest Generation, of which George, Bob, Bill, Betty, and all the players of this story were a part.
*World War II term for combat stress, 4/8/45 letter.

Korean War Redeployment

If the first half of the twentieth century was absorbed with the defeat of imperialism, fascism, and militarism, the second half was about containing the spread of Communism. Indeed it was the century of "isms." On June 25, 1950, Communist North Korea invaded the

free republic of South Korea in a bid to unite the Korean peninsula under Communism. The Communist fighters had almost pushed the South Korean Army out of Seoul and into the Yellow Sea, when America came to its aid in July. After saving the South Koreans at their last foothold on the Korean peninsula, the United States took the offensive with the intent to conquer all of the Korean peninsula. From a beachhead at Inchon near the Chinese border, the Americans pushed the Communists back north of the thirty-eighth parallel, the original demarcation line between the two Koreas, almost to the Yalu River separating North Korea and China. Then the Chinese People's Liberation Army, which had just a year earlier overrun the Kuomintang (Nationalist Chinese Army) and established a Communist government in Beijing, pushed the war back to the thirty-eighth parallel. The war front went back and forth but eventually ended in a stalemate close to the original dividing line where it began. A truce was agreed to in July 1953 after three years of fighting. Peace, it seems, was still an elusive hope. As of this writing in January 2015, there still exists a state of war between the two Koreas. A peace treaty has never been concluded. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is a pariah state that compensates for its weakness by grabbing world headlines with outrageous acts of belligerence, provocative rhetoric, and other such vitriol.

The Korean emergency necessitated the call up of reserves. First Lieutenant George H. Neilson was part of that call-up, much to his chagrin. He was reactivated as a pilot officer in May 1951, serving again in the Fifth Bomb Wing, Ninety-Seventh Bomb Group at its home at Biggs Air Base in El Paso, Texas. There, he essentially had a desk job with the Strategic Air Command, the global surveillance and readiness structure designed for a quick response to foreign attack. He worked in the personnel section as a comptroller and management analyst. He also flew the B-50 aircraft and spent a 110-day temporary duty in England. George severely lacerated his right hand when a bomb bay door slammed shut on it during a training jump on May 15, 1952, for which he received the Purple Heart.

Lt. Neilson became very unhappy with the inefficiencies of the air force bureaucracy. He combated a practice of reporting what was expected to higher-ups rather than reality. This violated his ethical principles as well as his civilian management training. He resented being taken from his wife and two young sons when he had already served a combat deployment during World War II. He was not quiet about his feelings about what he saw as poor, wasteful practices in the military, requiring two or three airmen and officers to do what ought to be accomplished by one. It was very personal to him because he felt that his call-up was unnecessary in this context. He exchanged letters and actually met with Massachusetts Senator Henry Cabot Lodge in Washington. He was discharged in January 1953 after a twenty-one-month stint, during which he was promoted to the rank of captain.

On an Air Force Reserve Inventory Questionnaire, George requested release, stating that he had already been recalled for twenty-one months after having served on active duty for thirty months during World War II. Wrote Neilson:

> I feel that I have given enough of my time to my country. I desire no more duty. I have an important management position with my firm. I desire not to sacrifice my career any further.[16]

It had become clear that plying the air force bureaucracy was not George's cup of tea. He was very disturbed by the disparity between what he learned at Harvard Business School and the grossly inefficient practices he was surrounded with at the Strategic Air Command.

Having served in the peacetime army myself, I can understand his frustration. With the exception of wartime, which is what a military organization is designed to function in, the main objective of command appears to be keeping people busy. This is not achieved by maximizing efficiency, because then too few people are occupied. If the objective is to keep as many people on active

duty as possible to maintain readiness, then doing things efficiently is counterproductive. None of this is officially recognized.

The fact is that George always saw the military as something you did if you were called upon but not something to volunteer for, at least in time of peace. To him, the army was something to survive, not something to embrace or make a career of.

Veteran Activity

As he had speculated in one of his letters at the end of the war in Europe, George was a frequent visitor at the Memorial Day ceremonies in Medford. However, he never wore his uniform or participated in any veteran's organizations. Once he was out of the service, he was out. I recall being terrified by the thunderous twenty-one-gun salute at the Oak Grove Cemetery in Medford where the Neilson ancestors were buried. The only thing I recall of my father's military life was the chest in which his military memorabilia were kept and the presence of several orange document boxes containing his World War II correspondence. I always looked curiously upon the boxes, curious to see what they contained. But I always restrained while he lived, respecting my father's likely wish for them to remain private.

Only occasionally did Dad mention his military life, and never did he say anything about his combat experiences. He would talk about the war with old buddies when he ran into them. On the one occasion that George and my father-in-law met, the two passed an evening of spirited reminiscence over their days flying heavy bombers our of Foggia. He received some letters from his favorite instructor, Don Lonstrup. He maintained some correspondence with Don, the Primary flight instructor who he long credited with making him into the pilot he was to become. Lonstrup's name and address were found in George's address directory after Mr. Neilson passed away in 1992. He made only rare reference to the "woah" (Bostonian for *war)*. Like most World War II veterans, he did not volunteer much about his wartime service unless specifically asked.

In 1989, I attended an air show with Dad when we both lived in the northern Indiana city of Elkhart. The attraction for us was a beautifully preserved B-17 plane owned by "the Confederate Air Force." Dad looked admiringly at the four-engine "beaut." We were able to climb into the plane and see the cockpit. I was taken aback at how austere the inside of the plane was. There was no insulation or decorative elements. It was basically a flying aluminum cylinder. I took it upon myself to tell the crew that Dad had piloted a Fort over Hitler's Reich. He spoke briefly with the pilot, and we left.

It wasn't until after my father's death that I became keenly interested in his war experiences. Had I been able to interview him during the writing of this book, I am sure that the already fascinating episodes would be more so. Thus, I would pass along a bit of advice from Barrett Tillman, author of *Forgotten Fifteenth*, a volume from which I derived much background for this writing.

> Historic memory is perishable—it has a shelf life. As this volume is published, the *Forgotten Fifteenth* was established seventy-one years ago. Its remaining veterans' median age is nearly ninety. In aviation terms, they are rapidly *departing the pattern.*
>
> For those intending to record the Second World War, I offer three words: "Do it now."[17]

A theme I have referred to frequently is that war is not just bombing missions, shooting, and battles. It is also ordinary people doing ordinary things. It is boredom as well as terror-charged moments when life and death hang in the balances. It is drudgery and entertainment. It is soldiers screaming in mortal pain, and it is roaring laughter. It has been my purpose for the reader to come to know the man as well as the war. Without the stories of water-fights in the barracks at Maxwell Field, buzzing farmers in Arkansas, collecting ration cigarettes to buy eggs in Foggia, the B-17 monkey, and all the rest of the Gomer Pyle tales, the

construct of war as all blood and guts might persist for the reader. It is these comical episodes that give a human touch to the hair-raising moments over the targets with 88 mm flak shells bursting all around, planes going down, and men bailing out in the tempest.

A Man of Rare Character

As I draw this saga to a close, I cannot but mention something that was perhaps one of the most gratifying rewards of this project. In all the nine hundred some days of George's army air force stint in World War II, one thing stood out among all the rest of the discoveries I made. The young George Neilson was a man of exceptional character.

War is an evil that tends to beget evil. Whether it was Memphis, London, or Capri, there was no shortage of opportunities for a young man to participate in activities that indulge the base drives of the flesh. George kept himself above the cesspool of creature-driven amusement. He was not snobby. He would go with the boys when they drank, but he opted for Coca-Cola. Rather than squander his military pay on wine, women, and song, he sent it home for his widow mother. Well, I suppose there was a *little* song.

It is possible to find in George's writing some personal flaws, especially if judged by the standards of today's social culture. Yet it must be remembered that he was throughout a young man on the threshold of discovering the world outside Boston. He was in a stage of rapid growth and learning. He did not have everything figured out. But when the balance sheet is reckoned, one cannot help but find an exceptionally strong and moral individual. His devotion to God, his country, and family were uncompromised. His determination to keep himself from the more serious vices of young manhood is admirable. His dedication to his duty, his faith, and values was exemplary and something that generations of his descendants can be proud of. I shall forever be grateful that my father served not only with courage but with integrity.

Finally, life tests and strengthens us in the crucible of our trials. We cannot grow without adversity. Lacking it we would ever be weak and dependent, like little babes in their parents' arms. Who we become is determined not so much by how we fare in the glowing sunshine when life is good. Rather, we become who God wants us to be through a tempering process of struggle. Our greatness is born in the furnace of affliction, where we are steeled for the great challenges that life presents through all its terrible glorious stages. George Neilson came of age in one of our country's greatest tests. The soldiering life ruined some men, not because they were killed or maimed by enemy fire but because they succumbed to their own weaknesses. Others became stronger as they turned from the baser forms of our existence to a higher plane, refusing to trade their birthrights for a mess of pottage. In the long run of eternity, it will not be whether a soldier lived or died that matters but whether he conquered his own passions in the glare of temptation. Whatever his life challenges may have been, I believe my father conquered his fears, his weaknesses, and his demons during the acid test of military service. For rather than be conquered by war, he conquered it, with all the wild insanity that surrounds it. For that alone, George was a hero. Becoming a great pilot, flying twenty-eight dangerous missions, and surviving to tell about it is all added on.

The World War II Memorial

Fifty-nine years after the capitulation of the Axis powers, the millions of American men and women who participated in World War II were honored with a national monument called the National World War II Memorial. The landmark was dedicated on May 29, 2004. The memorial's website states:

> The World War II Memorial honors the 16 million who served in the armed forces of the U.S., the more than 400,000 who died, and all who supported the war effort from home. Symbolic of the

> defining event of the 20th Century, the memorial is a monument to the spirit, sacrifice, and commitment of the American people. The Second World War is the only 20th Century event commemorated on the National Mall's central axis.[18]

My mother, Dorothy L. Neilson, and I were charter contributors to the memorial, and we were privileged to submit honoree citations for George H. Neilson. The text of the citation I contributed reads:

> B-17 pilot/copilot with 340th Bomb Squadron, 97th Bomb Group, 5th Wing, 15th U.S. Air force, Foggia, Italy. As 2nd/1st lieutenant, he flew 28 combat missions from December, 1944-April, 1945, including Balkan air campaign, Po valley campaign, and Apennine campaign. Received 3 air medals and Distinguished Flying Cross. Major targets included Brux, Blechhammer, Vienna, Ruhland, Bologna, and Linz. Missions included oil refineries, rail marshalling yards, airfields, and tactical support of 5th army in northern Italy. He and the crew ditched a B-17 in the Adriatic off the coast of Vis, 9 march 1945 returning from a bomb run on Graz, Austria. The entire crew was rescued by Yugoslav partisans, returned to Foggia, and survived the war.[19]

Dorothy's citation states:

> Served in the European theatre. Participated in the bombing of Italy and Romanian air fields.[20]

A Memorable Anecdote

In December 2014, I was deep in the throes of writing about Dad's initial combat missions. Dad, the war, and the letters home were

much on my mind. One chilly day, while entering our home in Kendallville, Indiana, a large flock of Canadian geese, flying in a typical V formation, passed right over my head. I thought, "There goes the Ninety-Seventh Bomb Group on its way to bomb the Messerschmitt factory at Wiener-Neustadt."

I never received the damage reports, but I have no reason to think that the mission was unsuccessful. Whether the geese ever made it to their watery destination that day I will never know. But what I do know, and will always hold in sacred remembrance, is that my father's commitment to duty and honor helped to save a world in crisis. And by the grace of God, he returned to tell about it. For that I will be ever grateful.

Epilogue

The following, which is the conclusion of George's late-life memoir work, suggests that he did not waste much time leaping into the future after returning home from the service.

RE-ORIENTING MY CAREER

I returned home and immediately set a goal of being accepted into the first post-war class at Harvard Business School. I consulted with my neighbor, friend and insurance man, Walter Barnard, for his advice. By coincidence, Walter was a friend of and had a client, Stanley Teele, Assistant Dean at Harvard Business School. Walter apparently put in a good word for me. Meanwhile, I secured a job as a junior accountant for a public accounting firm, Cobb-Reynolds & Co., Boston, @ $30.00/week.

THE MOST IMPORTANT MEETING OF MY LIFE

One night, in mid-October, I was fussing around a typewriter, in an effort to type up a decent copy of an application for Harvard, which by now I had gotten encouragement to do; and, I was trying hard to make it neat, accurate and thorough (the struggle for neatness was real difficult).

Meanwhile, in the living room of the family residence at 110 Sharon St., a girl-friend and former student of sister Betty, when Betty was teaching Physical Education at Roberts Jr. High and Medford Senior High Schools, was there for a visit. Betty introduced me to "Dottie Byrnes." Dottie asked if I wished her to do the typing. I replied, rather abruptly, that this was a private matter and that I could handle it. End of discussion.

As the evening wore on, Betty asked if I would care to walk Dottie to the bus stop, some ½ mile at West Medford Square. I willingly did that, and then some, as the walk continued for 3 ½ miles to her home at 92 Grant Ave. in south Medford. This was the beginning of the relationship that brought about the Dorothy and George Neilson family. Certainly, this meeting was, by far, the most important introduction-meeting of my life.

ACCEPTANCE AT HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL

In mid-November, 1945, I received a letter indicating my acceptance into the first post-war class at the school. There were 300 seats, chosen from 7200 applicants, that entered in Feb. 1946 and graduated in June, 1947. This, of course, was an invigorating and uplifting experience. Even 45 years later, this class is rated as one of the most productive classes in the history of the school. Many of the members started business and/or became leaders in the post-war business world.

For me, it provided the climax to the stimulation that the war experiences had given me, towards seeking higher performance in life, thus to take advantage of my drives and motivations to meet life's challenges. From the school, my area of specialization naturally turned towards marketing to become my "bread and butter" career following. (G.H.N., 1991)[1]

What Became of Them?

All of B-17 crew No. 1051, assembled at Tampa, Florida, on July 3, 1944 survived the war and returned home. From correspondence received by George in 1946, some is known of how his crewmates settled after the war.

Thomas Kiefer, pilot and crew commander, George's cockpit partner on his combat missions, married Carol and settled in Northport, Washington. After struggling for a time with physics, he majored in dairy husbandry. **Worth Dunn**, bombardier, went to Mississippi for chemical engineering but decided to study

medicine with the hope of becoming a doctor. **Carl Jones**, radio operator, sold insurance in Spokane, Washington, after the war. **Thomas Conway**, engineer, went home and may have worked in his family business, the Conway Iron Works in Newark, New Jersey. **Everett Ingwell**, armor gunner, lived in New Glarus, Wisconsin, helping run a restaurant. **Arnold Frank**, waist gunner, was in Moline, Illinois. Arnie married Ann and went to work at his prewar job with the power company in Genesco, Illinois. They had a daughter, Joyce, at his last correspondence with George in the first year after they were all discharged from active duty. **Elfren Gallego**, ball turret gunner, was in Los Angeles, California, studying business administration in college. **Mark Youell**, tail gunner, was also in Spokane, Washington. **Kendall Foster,** crew navigator, was married according to one of the crewmen's letters to George. No information was available about their later lives. The latest letter from a crew member I have is from **Worth Dunn**, bombardier, dated October 25, 1946.

Of **Randy Martin**, **Art Nebel**, and the other men who George went through cadets with, no information is available other than the fact that Randy Martin eventually came to fly a B-17 with the Eighth Air Force in England after George's having once established that he was condemned to being on a B-24 crew.

Anastasia ("Ma") Neilson was in poor health during the war, and the worry and anxiety of having three sons in a combat theater likely added to her health decline. She continued to live at the old Neilson family residence at 110 Sharon Street in Medford. This, however, was the twilight of a life dedicated to family and her previous occupation as a nurse. Having lost her husband in 1936, she finished raising her four children, saw them all through college degrees, and put them on a solid footing for successful lives as professional career people and parents. She passed away of heart failure and complications of diabetes in November 1957 at the age of seventy-seven.

Her life was honored by the amazing children she brought into the world and raised. The service they performed for their country during the Second World War will long stand as a tribute

to Mrs. Neilson's sturdy character, along with the indomitable love for her offspring.

Robert C. (Bob) Neilson, George's brother whose World War II service in the MTO crossed paths with him in the spring of 1945, was assigned to Camp Swift after he returned to the United States and recovered from his abdominal wound. In the fall of 1945, he was awarded a full retirement from the army as a captain, having been a major casualty in two theaters of the war. He went back to work for his former employer, Boston Woven Hose & Rubber Co., and was assigned to the Kansas City office. He also worked in the Dallas office, where he enjoyed the warm climate. In approximately 1950, he accepted an offer from Manhatten-Raybestos Rubber Co. to manage the Dallas office. He remained in the rubber business but took a job with Houston Belting Co. and relocated to Houston, where he lived for the remainder of his working years. He and his wife, Kay, adopted two beautiful daughters, Vicki and Leslie.

Bob suffered medical problems related to his wartime injury but otherwise lived a full life. He had a motorboat on Galveston Bay, resuming an interest born at the Mystic Lakes in the north Boston area. In fulfillment of his lifelong dream to own a farm, Bob purchased a seventeen-acre piece of land near New Ulm, seventy-two miles west of Houston. He and Kay built a ranch home on the farm, and it became their permanent year-round residence until 1981, when the pair moved back to Houston. Bob became involved with Catholic charities in response to his contacts with a nun, Sister Amelia, for whom he developed tremendous respect. Bob helped many people to combat their dependencies. For his work with the Catholic Retreat Center, Bob had a wing of the facility named after him. Bob passed away in January 1982 after a bout with cancer of the esophagus. He was eulogized by the director of the Retreat Center, who said,

> Bob was more influential than anyone in Houston in the success and growth of the Retreat Center. He has touched at least 2000 people in this area,

> to influence them to come to the Retreat Center to pray for help for their personal problems. It is often said that one man does not make a difference in this world. Here, in Bob, is an example of how one man does make a difference.[2]

I have already mentioned, in the beginning of this volume, the impact my uncle Bob had on me when I was struggling with my own conscripted induction into the US Army. I was stationed an hour away from Bob's New Ulm farm and would visit the family there on weekends. I was greatly blessed by my time with Bob, Kay, and his daughters. I came to love Bob for his kindness and generosity, his ability to understand life and assure me in my own time of crisis. His World War II experiences were always an inspiration in my life. I am proud to bear his given name.

The following was excerpted from George Neilson's 1991 Memoir:

Incidentally, the 10th Mountain Division became the most celebrated of all army organizations, in the post-war. They kept themselves organized as veterans. Approximately every two years, for at least 40 years after the war, the 10th Mountain people had reunions in mountain resort areas around the country. Meanwhile, the Germans and the Italians developed their own post-war organizations, as opponents to the 10th. Then, the locations of the reunions were expanded to visit in Italy and, even Germany. The comradery had developed to the degree that the various mountain troops respected each other and looked forward to exchanging views about life to each other. It evolved that Americans and Germans, when they met, compared notes and eventually identified where they had confronted each other in those Apennine Mountains. My brother, Bob, indicated that he had finally encountered the fellow that shot him. Meanwhile, when the 10th Mountain people met at some U.S. location, the Army would send a high ranking officer to pay respects. Usually, the Air Force sent a demonstration team. The veterans also developed

scholarships for students and generated other good will projects. Bob was always proud of the 10th Mountain and looked forward to attending some of their reunions. Senator [Robert] Dole, Kansas, was a member of the 10th Mountain Division. Many members of the organization went on to have very successful civilian careers.

At this point, it is well to point out that wars are terrible. They are never fair nor do they make sense. Everyone is, usually, against war. It will never, nor should it be, a popular situation to be in. But military training was a great springboard for the WW-II people. When they finished their duty, [a] very high percentage were motivated to be successful in civilian pursuits. We all should consider the values at stake for every young man, out of high school, to be required to have two years of military training for the good of the young men and for the benefit of the country. (G.H.N., 1991)[3]

William H. (Bill) Neilson Jr., the oldest son of William and Anastasia Neilson, George's oldest brother, returned from France after the war. He and his wife, Mary McIntyre Neilson, took up residence in the top floor of the Neilson three-family home built by William H. Neilson Sr. in Medford. Bill became commodore of the Medford Boat Club, of which the elder William Neilson had been a charter member. Bill returned to Suffolk Knitting Co. Suffolk sold woolen goods, including a line imported from Scotland, and served as a major wholesaler throughout New England. In 1954, the company relocated to New York City, the US center for clothing distribution. The office was then located in the Empire State Building, and the family moved to Port Washington on Long Island, one of the suburbs that expanded rapidly in the postwar economic boom. Three children, William III and twins Judy and Janet, were born to the couple.

Bill served in the army reserves for many years and was retired with the rank of colonel. Following the family passion for boating, Bill maintained cabin cruiser type powerboats on the Long Island Sound. He taught classes in navigation in the evenings and was well known in nautical circles in the Long Island suburban area.

Bill and Mary lived and retired in Port Washington. Their son, William III (also called Bill), served a two-year term of service in the army military police. He was assigned a tour in Pleiku, Vietnam, in 1972 during the Vietnam War. In his later years, Bill Sr. had surgeries on his coronary arteries and declined in the process. He died in 1993.[4]

Elizabeth A. (Betty) Neilson, George's only sister, to whom he addressed all of his correspondence along with his mother, was a woman of letters and accomplishment. Also bred in a family that highly valued recreation, Betty graduated from Boston University before pursuing graduate studies. She was an avid member of the Medford Boat Club. She received a bachelor's degree in physical education and taught women's physical education at various schools in the Boston area, also becoming qualified as a coach and official. She later taught at Lowell State Teachers College (now the University of Massachusetts—Lowell) and continued her work at BU, attaining masters and doctoral degrees. She became a nationally known lecturer and writer in the field of health education, serving a number of adjunct professorships, writing textbooks, and holding offices in many state and national professional organizations.

Betty traveled the country and the world on lecture tours but in her twilight years settled in her beloved White Mountains near Jackson, New Hampshire. Eventually, she relocated to Wells on the southern coast of Maine, where she retired fully. She was a Neilson legend, supporting her brothers and their families with unending encouragement. Of her brother, George, she said to me at a family gathering years after his death, "He was a hero," referring to his service in World War II. Though George and Betty would sometimes spar over politics, finances, and public affairs, the two were always close. She was deeply beloved of my family, and we have often referred to her as a third parent. Betty faithfully cared for Ma Neilson until the latter's passing. Her service to mankind as a health educator founded a legacy that will ever be respected.[5] Betty passed away in 2001, a week before her ninetieth birthday.

George H. Neilson reported for duty at Greensboro, North Carolina, following a two-week leave at home after the war. He sent a telegram to Ma on September 24, 1945 that read, "Discharged expect to be home tomorrow night. George." He evidently was given credit for some accumulated leave time, as his official certificate of release was certified as October 16, 1945.[6]

Career Development

After leaving the AAF, George took a job with Cobb-Reynolds accounting firm in Boston. George was accepted to the first postwar class at Harvard Business School, receiving his master of business administration (MBA) in June 1947.[7]

The business marketing upstart hired on as a sales manager and eventually as a market research analyst for General Electric Co.'s clock and timer division, Telechron, at Ashland, Massachusetts. General Electric transferred Mr. Neilson to manage its district office for Upstate New York in 1950 near Syracuse. Dorothy and the two boys stayed in nearby Cazenovia, New York, when George was recalled to active duty for the Korean War. George and the young family returned to the Boston area after his second discharge in 1953, after which he resumed his career with General Electric. There, he became a national sales manager of consumer goods.

On September 30, 1955, having fulfilled his ten-year obligation to the Air Force Reserves, George was issued a full honorable discharge, though the military had for three years been far in the background.

George left General Electric in July 1963 to assume a new position as manager of corporate marketing for Atlas Steels Ltd., Welland, Ontario, Canada, a company that traded $90 million in annual sales in the booming stainless steel market.

Life in Canada, though an interesting and controversial experience in the family, was short-lived. Over a ten-year period from 1963 to 1973, the family moved on the average every two

years as George sought to advance his career and provide for a growing family. In the fall of 1964, George accepted a position with Scoville Manufacturing's Hamilton-Beach Division in Racine, Wisconsin, as a marketing executive. There were subsequent moves to Grand Rapids, Michigan (1968), Mountaintop, Pennsylvania (1970), and Elkhart, Indiana (1973).

By the 1970s, Dorothy had grown weary of being perennially uprooted from her friends. George promised her that the move to Elkhart would be the last. He kept that promise. He worked at different positions in the mobile home / recreation vehicle mecca of Elkhart. He encountered several challenges in a field that had become exhaustingly competitive and extremely sensitive to fluctuations in the national economy.[8]

Finally, in 1981, George was able to realize his career-long objective of owning and running his own company. He invested much of his capital assets into an Elkhart business that manufactured recreation vehicle components using computer-driven cutting technology.

As he approached his late sixties, Dad remarked to me once, "There is no retirement in this life." He believed that retiring was the best way to an early trip to the grave. He was always driven by a relentless passion to succeed, which eventually commuted to a battle to survive. Throughout his life, he held to the belief that he often cited, "Life is a battle."

Marriage and Family

On September 11, 1948, George married Dorothy Louise Byrnes, the daughter of local seamstress Amy J. Byrnes and her late husband, Patrick J. Byrnes, both of whom had emigrated from Newfoundland. George and Dorothy raised eight children. George Jr. (Hutch) was born in 1949, Robert (Bob) in 1950, Gary in 1953, Elizabeth (Beth) in 1954, Gretchen in 1956, Mark in 1958, Donna in 1960, and Kristan (Kris) in 1964.

George and Dorothy ("Dottie" to George) raised their brood with high expectations, one result of which was that each received

at least a baccalaureate degree in college or university. More importantly perhaps, each followed his or her own interests and led productive lives.

George made well on his parents' love of physical activity. He relived his boyhood memories of boating when he purchased a thirty-two-foot sail sloop in 1966 when the family lived two blocks from Lake Michigan in Racine, Wisconsin. He enjoyed many hours with his family and sailing solo on Lake Michigan's precarious waters. In 1968, when the family moved to Grand Rapids, George and a boating friend sailed the boat across the great inland sea and arranged to moor the craft *Windward* at Holland, Michigan. When the family moved to northeastern Pennsylvania in 1970, George reluctantly sold the boat. He traded the helm for a bicycle and began wearing out racing bikes in the countryside of the Pocono Mountains region. Landing in Indiana in 1973, the flat plains of the Midwest offered much more commodious bicycle riding, so George compensated by extending his daily reach, pedaling upwards of twenty miles a day.

The veteran aviator played an occasional game of golf but was never a links addict. He loved to garden, took great pride in his roses, and raised a huge vegetable garden in a plot that a doctor neighbor shared with him.

Final Years: The Last Mission

In 1988, George and Dorothy's children arranged for a wonderful afternoon for their parents at the Tippecanoe House Inn in South Bend, Indiana, in honor of their fortieth wedding anniversary. It was a time of joy and celebration unlike any we had ever known, with almost all of the Neilson children, their spouses, and children present. But it was unfortunately the last such celebration the family was to enjoy before George was called up for his last combat mission, his final sortie in the strategic campaign of life.

After an agonizing struggle with back pain and a series of unsuccessful treatment experiments, George was diagnosed with multiple myeloma cancer in 1989. To George, this was just another

of life's great battles. He fought it with incredible determination, never giving allowance for the possibility it might not end in victory, or at least victory as a cure.

There were doctors, tests, surgery, radiation treatments, medications, and hospitalizations. George "leaned out the mixture" and "feathered propellers." But by the summer of 1992 he was rapidly "losing altitude." In the presence of his beloved "crew" (family), George's ship "went down" in the predawn hours of September 14, 1992, clutching his "throttle" (life) until the end. He was seventy years old. The timeworn pilot had flown his last mission and did not return to "base" that day. He was laid to rest in Elkhart's Rice "Airfield" (Cemetery) on the gusty, late-summer afternoon of September 16.

George H. Neilson passed from this earth. But he wasn't really dead; he was just transferred to another unit, one where there was plenty of flying to do but no bombs, no 88 mm flak, and no Me109s. Where he had gone, there would only be clear skies and perfectly purring engines. No men would go down in burning planes. No searing missiles would pierce the verdant blue. There would only be euphoric flying in the sky paradise that God created it to be.

As difficult as was George's final struggle to survive, a struggle that he made with nobility and grace, there came a time when he had to relent to the overwhelming power of the "enemy" (disease) that had afflicted him for four years. He was called home by his "commanding officer" (maker), and he went after a heroic fight to the end.

Dad's last years were some of the best we ever had with him. As his body weakened, his mind remained strong. During those times we spent with him, when life finally left him no choice but to sit and reflect, he did much of this. In this rather pensive state, his heart opened, and he shared thoughts and feelings that he had seldom in life expressed, at least to his children. He expressed his love and his appreciation for the family that supported him in his extremities. He poured forth his gratitude to all who assisted him ... nurses, doctors, aides, and those of his own family who

spent hours keeping him company and provided vigilant watch care, especially his beloved Dottie. He talked much about life, a favorite topic of his.

The following is quoted from a piece eulogizing George shortly after his passing:

> George often expressed in one form or another that much of what one does, or should do in life is based not on what one wants to do, but on what is right and proper to do. His flying a plane into the jaws of death and out again certainly represents the same kind of mentality that carried him through the flak of life, and through his last great battle.[9]

George and Dorothy
celebrate their wedding
on September 11, 1948

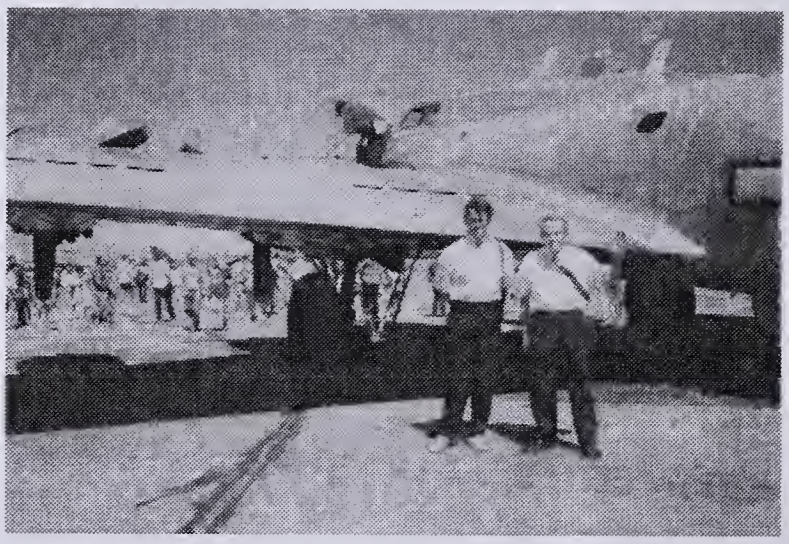
L-R Dorothy L. Neilson,
George's bride, Mrs. Amy J.
Byrnes, mother of Dorothy,
Mrs. Anastasia Neilson
(Ma), George at wedding
of George and Dorothy.

Betty 1962

Neilson reunion in Jackson, New
Hampshire, September 1979
Front (L-R) Betty, Kay
Back (L-R) George, Dorothy, Bill, Bob, Mary

George and Dorothy at their home in Elkhart, Indiana, 1989

George H. Neilson Jr. (Hutch) and wife Linda at the National WWII Memorial, Washington D.C.



George with son Mark by B-17 owned by the Confederate Air Force at Elkhart Air Show, June, 1990

George types his late-life Memoir, A World War II Experience, 1991

Family of George and Dorothy Neilson, 1983. Bottom row L-R, Donna, Bob, Dorothy, Mark, Beth; Top row L-R, Gary, Gretchen, George, George Jr. (Hutch), Kris.
The occasion was the wedding of Gary Neilson and Trudy Havens, Lake Geneva, Wisconsin

Appendix I

Excerpted accounts of Lt. Neilson's bombing missions from Kevin A. Mahoney, (2013), *Fifteenth Air Force against the Axis: Combat missions over Europe during World War II*. *Lanham: Scarecrow Press.*[1] Pages noted by each citation.

1. Mission #1, December 6, 1944, Zagreb, Yugoslavia

   The 5th and 304th Bomb Wings, with their escort from the 52d Fighter Group did not complete their missions because of bad weather. (p. 209)

2. Mission #2, December 9, 1944, Regensburg, Germany

   Seventy-nine B-17s from the 2nd, 97th, and 463rd Bomb Groups did bomb the marshalling yards and oil storage at Regensburg through slight, inaccurate flak while sixteen from the 2nd Bomb Group bombed the Skoda factory at Pilsen, Czechoslovakia. All used PFF [radar] in their attacks. Overcast prevented observation of results, on either mission but reconnaissance revealed some sheds damaged, and main rail lines cut at Regensburg on either this mission or that of November 22. Mustangs tangled with two Me262s near the target but made no claims. (p. 294)

3. Mission #3, December 16, 1944, Brux, Czechoslovakia

   Beginning the Blitz on oil targets, ninety-six B-17s of the 2nd, 97th, 99th, and 301st Bomb Groups and 205 B-24s from the 490th, 55th, and 304th

Bomb Wings attacked the oil refinery at Brux, Czechoslovakia using PFF, escorted by 101 P-38s from the 14th and 82nd Fighter Groups and 173 P-51s from the 306th Fighter Wing.

Nine Liberators and a Mustang went down on the mission. According to Mahoney, damage assessment was not available because of cloud cover at the target. Cumulative effects were reported but not by specific raid and unit. (p. 297)

4. Mission #4, December 17, 1944, Blechhammer, Silesia, Germany

The Fifteenth returned to German oil targets as the 2nd, 97th, 99th, and 301st Bomb Groups attacked the northern refinery at Blechhammer with 155 B-17s using PFF but overcast prevented observation of results.

Continuing his summary of the raid, Mahoney noted that cumulative effects from this raid and those on December 12 and 18 included *damage to switch houses, the main compressor, cooling towers, gas injectors, the distillation unit, workshops and the labor camp.* (pp. 298, (pp.300)

5. Mission #5, December 25, 1944, Brux, Czechoslovakia

Returning to the oil refinery at Brux, 146 Fortresses B-17s from the 5th Bomb Wing bombed it through intense, accurate flak using PFF and badly damaged the powerhouse, injector house, and several processing units. The 99th, 463rd, and 483rd Bomb Groups each lost a Fortress on the mission. (pp. 303-304)

6. Mission #6, December 27, 1944, Vienna, Austria

   Heavy overcast led many Fortresses from the 5th Bomb Wing briefed for oil targets in Vienna, and escorted by fifty-two P-51s from the 332nd Fighter Group, to bomb Austrian alternates. The 97th Bomb Group did bomb its briefed target, Vosendorf Oil Refinery, with thirty-nine B-17s, employing PFF, the attack did not damage the refinery, but hit a chemical factory. (p. 306)

7. Mission #7, December 29, 1944, Innsbruck, Austria

   Weather hampered a raid on Innsbruck's main marshalling yard by the 5th Bomb Wing. Forty-three B-17s from 97th, 99th, and 463rd Bomb Groups bombed the yard using PFF while twenty-seven Fortresses from the 483rd Bomb Group bombed the western marshalling yard as an alternate, also using PFF. These attacks, however, only inflicted slight damage to several stations and a viaduct. (pp. 308-09)

8. Mission #8, January, 4, 1945, Verona, Italy

   Attacks on Italian targets began soon after the New Year, as ninety-one B-17s from the 2nd, 97th, 99th, and 483rd Bomb Groups and forty-one B-24s from the 454th and 455th Bomb Groups bombed the Porto Nuovo Marshalling Yard in Verona, encountering generally moderate, accurate flak. The attack cut main rail lines, badly damaged rolling stock, and damaged a rail junction and an arsenal. (p. 313)

9. Mission #9, January 19, 1945, Brod, Yugoslavia

   At the south marshalling yard in Brod, forty B-24s of the 98th, and 376th Bomb Groups and

seventy-three B-17s from the 97th and 483rd Bomb Groups destroyed the main station, damaged a choke point and locomotive workshops, and cut the rail line between two rail yards. (p. 316)

10. Mission #10, February 1, 1945, Graz, Austria

One hundred-fifteen B-17s from the 2nd, 97th, 99th, 301st, and 463rd bomb groups and ninety-seven B-24s of the 449th, 459th, 461st, 465th, and 484th Bomb Groups bombed the marshalling yard at Graz as an alternate, using PFF. The attack destroyed a roundhouse and damaged a turntable and some rolling stock in the yards, but also inflicted extensive damage to the town. (p. 323)

11. Mission #11, February 5, 1945, Regensburg, Bavaria, Germany

Most of the aircraft from the 5th Bomb Wing... used PFF in their attack on the Regensburg oil storage facility with 218 B-17s and 336 B-24s made through mostly moderate, inaccurate flak, with an escort of sixty-five P-38s from the 305th Fighter Wing and 133 P-51s...Damage from this raid and that of January 20, including damage to a number of storage tanks, a distillation unit, and oil treatment plant, other buildings, rail sidings, and tank cars. Bombs also severely damaged barge slips, a railroad bridge, and the eastern marshalling yard. (p. 324)

12. Mission #12, February 15, 1945, Vienna, Austria

The remaining groups of 5th Bomb Wing, 117 Fortresses of the 97th, 463rd, and 483rd Bomb Groups, attacked the Southeast Freight

Depot in Vienna, but hit the South Ordnance Depot instead, destroying or badly damaging a number of buildings. The moderate, accurate flak encountered did not shoot down any aircraft, but the 463rd lost a Fortress hit by bombs from another plane. (p. 331)

(Note: At first glance, Mahoney's statement seems to conflict with George's 1991 account. As far as the discrepancy between George's assessment that his group made "direct-hits on the tanks" and Mahoney's, "...they did not damage the plant," explanations are only hunches. It was undoubtedly difficult to determine which planes hit what in analysis of bombing results, and in George's 1991 account, his use of the word *we* in "the Group Intelligence Officer came to our officer's tent and showed us the photos of the direct hits *we* had made on the tanks" could well have referred to the 5th Bomb Wing rather than the 97th Bomb Group, as the 97th was part of the 5th Wing. It is possible that the tanks were not part of the Benzoil plant, but were instead located near the marshalling yard. The other factor at play was the tendency for combatants' field reports to overstate their successes. Mahoney's review had the bombs falling in residential areas rather than the rail yards for which they were intended.)

13. Mission #13, February 16, 1945, Bolzano, Italy

The 2nd, 97th, 99th, and 463rd Bomb Groups, hit the marshalling yard at Bolzano, Italy with eighty-five B-17s. This attack blocked most main rail lines and damaged the roundhouse, a locomotive depot, repair shops, storage buildings, and freight cars. (p. 333)

14. Mission #14, February 17, 1945, Linz, Austria

The 2nd, 97th, 301st, and 463rd Bomb Groups bombed the Main Station marshalling yards in Linz, through overcast using PFF, with 149 B-17s. Bombing through mostly moderate, accurate flak, they missed the yards, hitting a residential area. The last group of the 5th Bomb Wing, the 483rd Bomb Group, hit the Benzoil Plant in Linz using PFF with forty B-17s. Bombing through moderate, but inaccurate flak, they did not damage the plant. (p. 333)

15. Mission #15, February 19, 1945, Klagenfurt, Austria

One hundred-twenty Fortresses from the 2md, 97th, 99th, 301st, and 463rd Bomb Groups, as well as three B-24s from the 460th, bombed Klagenfurt's marshalling yards without encountering opposition. This attack cut main rail lines, badly damaged the station, and damaged a roundhouse, warehouses, and rolling stock. Bombs also damaged factories, a train depot, and a gas plant. (p. 335)

16. Mission #16, February 22, 1945, Memmingen, Bavaria, Germany

According to Mahoney all Groups of the 15th struck smaller targets all over southern Germany and Austria, though weather hampered the operation known as *Operation Clarion*. Half of the planes never dropped their bombs. Of George's squadron, *Another eight from the 97th attacked the marshalling yards at Memmingen but missed the yards.* Enemy fighters were engaged in the overall operation, including jets. However, only two B-24s were lost. Such was frequently the case with high

altitude bombing. Success depended on repeat bombing of the same target rather than a single raid. (pp. 338-40)

17. Mission #17, February 27, 1945, Verona, Italy

The 5th Bomb Wing attacked the railroad bridge in Verona with 177 Fortresses from the 97th, 99th, 301st, 463rd, and 483rd Bomb Groups. Encountering moderate, accurate flak, they destroyed or damaged several spans and cut tracks leading to one bridge. (p. 344)

18. Mission #18, March 2, 1945, Linz, Austria

Turning to marshalling yards and encountering intense, accurate flak, four wings of the Fifteenth struck the main marshalling yard at Linz. Some of the 149 B-17s from the 5th Bomb Wing and 239 B-24s…used PFF to bomb and cut many tracks in the yards. (p.354)

19. Mission #19, March 9, 1945, Graz, Austria

The reason the 97th BG wasn't mentioned by Mahoney for this mission is that George's crew bombed Graz as an opportunity target as a lone plane, and not part of the 97th Group action, which was at Vienna. Mahoney did not include groups of fewer than 5 bombers in his account.

20. Mission #20, March 15, 1945, Ruhland, Germany/Kolin, Czechoslovakia

In the deepest penetration of Germany by the Fifteenth to date, the 5th Bomb Wing attacked the oil refinery at Ruhland with 128 B-17s from the 91st, 301st, 463rd, and 483rd bomb Groups, escorted by

*145 P-51 from the 52nd, 325th, and *332nd Fighter Groups. Bombing with PFF, they hit a corner of the refinery and damaged a gas plant, pump house, and other buildings. The raid also cut a rail line and badly damaged a factory. Confusion at the primary and PFF problems forced eighty-two aircraft from the 2nd, 97th, 99th, and 301st to attack the oil refinery at Kolin, Czechoslovakia as an alternate, some using PFF to bomb. Their bombs struck throughout the plant, damaging a distillation unit, and oil treatment plant, a power plant, a boiler house. Crews encountered largely intense, accurate flak at Ruhland and moderate to intense flak at Kolin. The 2nd, 301st, and 463rd Bomb Groups each lost a Fortress.* (p. 357-58)
*Red Tails

21. Mission #21, March 20, 1945, Vienna, Austria

The 97th and 99th Bomb Groups bombed Korneuburg Oil Refinery near Vienna with sixty-five B-17s, while fourteen more of their aircraft joined the raid on the marshalling yards at Amstetten. The raid covered the entire refinery, damaging stills, a distillation plant, the stabilization unit, storage tanks, tank cars, and siding, and a residential area near the refinery. Moderate, accurate flak shot down a 99th Bomb Group Fortress.

One hundred forty-two Lightnings from the 305th Fighter Wing with 177 Mustangs from the 306th Fighter Wing flew the escort for these missions and the 1st Fighter Group dropped chaff. A flight of about 8 FW190s and Me109s tangled with the 325th Fighter Group and the latter claimed two destroyed, later confirmed and one probable.

The only loss was a 332nd Fighter Group to a mechanical problem. (pp. 363-64)

22. Mission #22, March 25, 1945, Prague, Czechoslovakia

One hundred-sixty Fortresses from the 5th Bomb Wing, with forty-eight B-24s from the 451st and 484th Bomb Groups, struck Kbely Airfield in Prague, Czechoslovakia. Bomb concentrations covered the field, with fourteen aircraft destroyed and thirty-five damaged. The raid also damaged barracks, the administration building, a hangar, and a workshop, as well as some residential buildings. Various other airfields and armaments factories were hit on the same mission. (p. 369-70)

23. Mission #23, April 1, 1945, Maribor, Yugoslavia

Communications targets started off the month, as 125 Fortresses from the 5th Bomb Wing attacked the railroad bridge at Maribor in Yugoslavia, escorted by forty-eight P-38s from the 1st Fighter Group, although smoke prevented a quarter of the bombers from bombing. The raid badly damaged the deck of the bridge, blocked one approach and damaged the other. Moderate, intense flak at the bridge shot down three Fortresses: two from the 483rd and one from the 463rd Bomb Group. (p. 377)

24. Mission #24, April 5, 1945, Udine, Italy

Communications targets started off the month, as 125 Fortresses from the 5th Bomb Wing attacked the railroad bridge at Maribor in Yugoslavia, escorted by forty-eight P-38s from the 1st Fighter Group, although smoke prevented a quarter of the bombers from bombing. The raid badly damaged

the deck of the bridge, blocked one approach and damaged the other. Moderate, intense flak at the bridge shot down three Fortresses: two from the 483rd and one from the 463rd Bomb Groups. (p. 379)

25. Mission #25, April 9, 1945, Bologna

The full strength of the Fifteenth attacked front line positions near Bologna, code named "Apple" and "Apricot" Areas, with 242 B-17s and 583 B-24s in preparation for the Allied offensive. Ninety Mustangs from the 52nd and 332nd Fighter Groups escorted the bombers. The bombing was fair, hitting gun positions and other targets while encountering generally moderate, accurate flak. The only loss was a B-24 from the 450th Bomb Group hit by the bombs dropped by another aircraft. (p. 384)

26. Mission #26, April 11, 1945, Vipiteno, Italy

Despite largely moderate, accurate flak, the remainder of the 5th Bomb Wing, the 97th, 301st, 463rd, and 483rd Bomb Groups, struck the railroad bridge at Vipiteno with eighty-eight Fortresses, joined by forty-five Liberators of the 55th Bomb Wing from the Campo di Trens mission. Although smoke covered the bridge, the bombers blocked both bridge approaches. (p. 385)

27. Mission #27, April 16, 1945, Bologna, Italy

The full bomber strength of the Fifteenth again attacked front-line areas in northern Italy, but more than three quarters of them did not drop their bombs on their overcast targets. One hundred-one Liberators from the 55th Bomb Wing and 450th and 484th Bomb Groups did manage to hit gun

positions, ammunition dumps, headquarters, and troop concentrations in the Bologna area, but scored only a few hits in the target area because of the overcast. One hundred-two Mustangs from the 52nd, 325th, and 332nd Fighter Groups and six Lightnings from the 1st flew as the escort. (p. 390)

28. Mission #28, April 19, 1945, Rattenberg, Austria

The 5th Bomb Wing attacked the railroad bridge at Rattenberg, Austria, with 215 Fortresses, encountering slight, inaccurate flak. Seventy-two P-51s from the 31st Fighter Group escorted the mission that destroyed the bridge and a highway bridge, damaged a factory and a supply depot, and cut all rail lines and damaged rolling stock in a marshalling yard. (p. 392)

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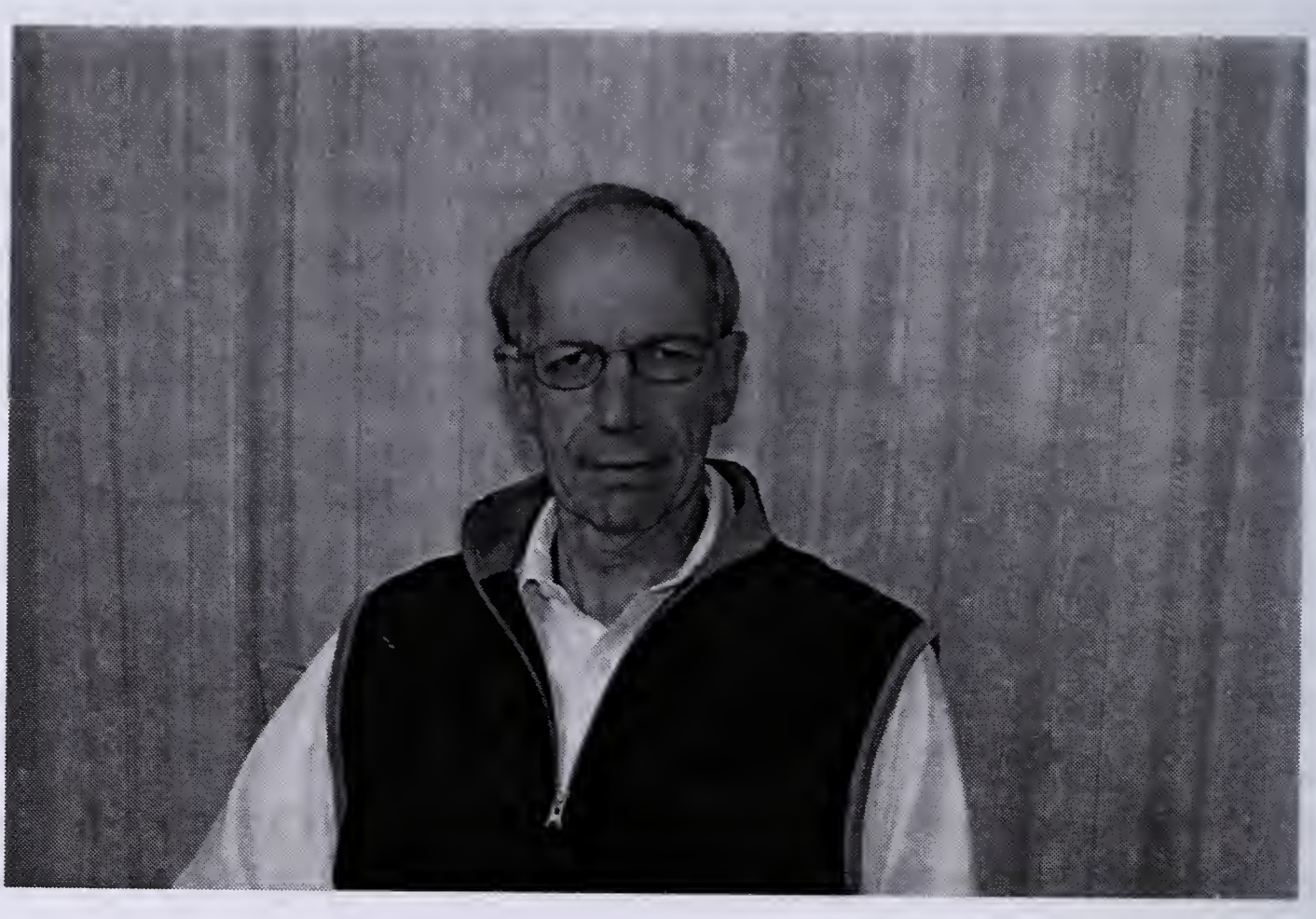
About the Author

Robert P. Neilson

The second son of George and Dorothy Neilson, Robert (Bob) Neilson, sixty-five, grew up in Wellesley, Massachusetts, where the Neilsons lived not far from the family's ancestral home of Medford, an old suburb of Boston. He moved with his parents to several states and Canada while his father built his career in marketing management. He graduated from St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota, with a BA in liberal arts. He served two years in the United States Army, having been drafted during the Vietnam War, but served his tour in West Germany as a medic. After his release from the service, he obtained a teaching license at Brigham Young University and later earned a master's and specialist's degrees in educational administration. He was an elementary school teacher, elementary school principal, and an assistant superintendent for curriculum during a thirty-six-year career before retiring in 2014. Married to Joyce Elaine Haupt of Provo, Utah, Bob and Joyce raised five children and now have seven grandchildren. Bob loves gardening, history, and sometimes enjoys being handyman projects. Bob was always a history buff and has had a lifelong fascination with the enigmatic and mysterious human institution of war, especially World War II and the Civil War. He has written several unpublished personal histories and travelogues but stated unequivocally that *A Bomber Pilot's Story* is his most satisfying achievement of his life as a writer.



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Flying a B-17 Flying Fortress with the Fifteenth Air Force out of Foggia, Italy, Lt. George H. Neilson describes the harrowing experiences of his twenty-eight combat missions as well as the ups and downs of life in the US Army Air Corps from enlistment to discharge (1943–45).

Blending selections of his father's letters to home and memoirs he recorded a half century later with documented background history, the younger Neilson tells the saga of the son of a Boston widow as he confronts the rigors of pilot-officer training and combat service in the Mediterranean Theater of Operations during the final six months of World War II in Europe.

George depicts the humorous and mundane sides of army life as well as the terror-filled moments during bomb runs over targets in Austria, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Yugoslavia, and Austria as antiaircraft flak bursts battered the aircraft. Neilson's daily chronicles juxtapose moments when life and death hung in the balance, such as when he landed his crippled Fort in the Adriatic Sea, with the unexpected moments of splendor, such as when he dined in luxury on the Isle of Capri at a castle owned by the royal family of Italy. Flying in formation through clouds so thick that the plane thirty feet off his wing was invisible, George received the Distinguished Flying Cross for his ability as a skilled instrument pilot. He recounts youthful escapades on duty-free hours and the tales of life in Foggia's mud-bound tent city in the spur of Italy. It includes the stirring story of his visit to a field hospital where his brother, a captain in the infantry, was recovering from a bullet wound incurred in the fighting in the Apennine Mountain campaign. Finally, the story tells of World War II's fiery end and how he unknowingly worked on the secret research project to develop the atomic bomb in a lab at MIT before enlistment. For the student of history and aviation and its role in the Allied victory over Hitler's nefarious Reich, this microhistory will not disappoint.

Anastasia (Ma) Neilson

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